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Identity, Difference, Religion: Multiculturalism and British Converts to Islam

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September 2018

A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with the requirements for
award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Law.

Word Count: 80 309

Abstract

This thesis is concerned with British converts to Islam and multiculturalism. It argues that the conceptual tools for thinking about identity and belonging in the literature in these areas fall short. To address this, it develops discussions of two central problematics: the dynamics between continuity and change, and between religion and culture. Doing so, it makes three interrelated contributions to existing scholarship.

The first is to multiculturalism. It is argued that multiculturalism has not taken sufficient account of religious identities with regard to its central concepts of difference and recognition, conceiving these based on ethnic difference, which resultantly fall short of being able to include converts. However, addressing *religiosity* provides a fruitful perspective to the goals of multiculturalism. Furthermore, this has implications for how belonging and the position of converts to Islam are conceived in British society. This is explored through a discussion based on an analytical framework that draws on Simmel's *stranger* and his distinction between *religiosity* and *religion*.

The second contribution is to the sociological literature on religious identities, notably that of conversion to Islam. It is argued that concepts in this literature unnecessarily mischaracterise these identities but that through Simmel's notion of *religiosity*, a theoretical shift can open up space for religious subject positions. It does so alongside developing a theoretically informed methodological approach to studying religious identity based on narrative.

The third contribution is to the representations of Muslim converts in the West, based on a problematic understanding of the religious and cultural. It is argued a sociological account enriched through a conversation with theological principles provides a different perspective on conceiving the relation between the religious and the cultural as well as the religious and the secular. This, furthermore, has implications for thinking through Islamophobia and the necessity of a multi-level analysis.

Acknowledgements

I am first and foremost indebted to my participants, who shared their stories, including their joys and struggles, hopes and frustrations, thoughts and feelings. Not only would this thesis not have happened or been as rich without their interest, willingness and generosity in this regard, these stories have also enriched my own perspectives and modes of thought and feeling. For this I am indebted indeed.

I am extremely grateful to my supervisors, Professor Tariq Modood and Dr Therese O'Toole, for their support, encouragement, probing, prodding, and not least patience. Their guidance has undoubtedly meant that what is contained here is far better than it could otherwise have been, and I hope that it is of a standard that reflects their input.

I owe a large debt of gratitude (and a grill – I haven't forgotten!) to Rashid Ansari, without whose help and generosity this would have been a far more difficult project to get going. I am also indebted to those who let me explain my research to groups they run, put me in touch with people, and disseminated my information, and hope I am forgiven for not naming names in the interest of preserving the confidentiality of those who subsequently responded and whose words appear throughout.

Special thanks is also due to Yasmin Soysal and Mike Roper. Without their encouragement and enthusiasm for my ideas at their earliest stage, this may never have happened.

Finally, my family, whose support has come in a very different guise, but one just as important. It is grounding and reassuring to have the support of those with whom we don't have discussions about what I read, write and think and how well the arguments and contents of this thesis fit and follow, but rather are just interested in how I'm doing.

Author's Declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's *Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes* and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of, others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

SIGNED:Thomas Sealy DATE:.....14th September 2018.....

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Chapter 1: Introduction

“In the eyes of Muslims, I am the wrong kind of Muslim. In everyone’s eyes, I am a bizarre human being.”

(A Danish convert, quoted in Jensen, 2008: 401)

Converts to Islam occupy an ambiguous place as part of the social landscape. Their religious identity is questioned by ‘majority society’, their family and friends, and by born Muslims. They come to be positioned as doubly strange – or bizarre – in the eyes of everyone. The main purposes of this thesis are to explore, firstly, how and why this is so, and secondly, how and why this needn’t be so. The central problem at the heart of this thesis, and which underpins its concerns, is a theoretical shortcoming in the conceptualisations of religious identity as *religious* identity in two bodies of literature related in this regard, those of multiculturalism and of conversion to Islam in Britain. In both, religious identity is seen as contained within and/or as discrete from ethnic or national identity, thereby mischaracterising how these identities are experienced. Moreover, these insufficient accounts of religious identity have important analytical implications which bear on understanding patterns of belonging and Islamophobia. To address this problem, the thesis presents an alternative theoretical approach and understanding of the identities of British converts to Islam which brings *religiosity* to the foreground.

The thesis orients its approach toward multiculturalism, and posits British converts to Islam as unusual multicultural subjects. It is argued that multiculturalism has not taken sufficient account of religious identities when theorising recognition and difference; based on ethnicity, converts fall outside its identity conceptualisations for Muslims. This thesis gives an account of these identities and argues that *religiosity* needs to come to the foreground in order to accommodate converts as multicultural subjects, and draws on Simmel’s notion of *religiosity* for this task. This has further sociological implications for thinking about belonging. In order to explore these issues, this thesis argues that a mutually enriching conversation between sociology and theological principles is necessary and, moreover, that a multi-level analysis that brings the micro, median and macro into play is also fundamental to the task.

Gauri Viswanathan has compellingly argued that conversion can “unsettle the boundaries which selfhood, citizenship, nationhood, and community are defined” (Viswanathan, 1998: 16). While Viswanathan approached her study, in India, from conversions to the mainstream religion, this thesis explores this from the perspective of conversion to a minority religion. In

order to approach these conversions from this vantage point this thesis is not a study of conversion in the vein of what we might call the 'conversion literature'. That is, its aim is not to explain conversions or model them as processes, not least because, as perhaps the most prominent scholar of conversion in recent decades has put it, "theories of conversion often tell us more about the one making the attribution than the person or group that has converted" (Rambo, 1999: 261). Rather, it brings the literature on conversion to Islam together with that on multiculturalism in order to address and contribute to the theories and concepts for approaching and understanding issues of identity and belonging in both.

The orientation through multiculturalism proceeds from four initial reasons. The first is that it is not too much of an exaggeration to say that Islam and Muslims in Britain have, for almost three decades, been the central feature of the literature of multiculturalism in Britain. It has in fact been remarked that multiculturalism in Britain "properly t[ook] off with the Rushdie affair" (Modood, 2016: 483), and, moreover, that this also marked "the beginning of the end of [the] illusion of religion's insignificance" (Knott, 2012). While this should not mean that discussions about multiculturalism are or should be confined to Islam and Muslims, it does highlight the pertinence of this focus and points towards particular social conditions. Secondly, multiculturalism has been centrally concerned with the two core concerns of this thesis, those of identity and of belonging. In relation to this, a third reason is related to the conceptual overlap between the literatures on multiculturalism and conversion to Islam on these two issues. These three culminate in the fourth reason for orienting this study through multiculturalism. By approaching a study of British converts to Islam in this way, it is argued that converts can contribute an alternative perspective and open up spaces on debates around religion as it relates to identity and belonging, and Islamophobia.

A central argument is that being made 'doubly strange' stems from a particular understanding of the relationship between the secular and religious, and, moreover, how this more specifically relates to Islam and Muslims in Britain. Drawing on Simmel's notion of *religiosity*, it is argued that conceptualisations of converts' religious identities mischaracterise these identities, often seeing them as either oppositional to or discrete from other identity categories, or as a proxy for or concomitant with ethnic or cultural identities. It, moreover, argues that to this end a conception of congruity with regard to religious identity as part of the conversion process, rather than change and/or continuity, achieves this task.

Developing from this, the thesis presents a challenge to the ways in which the identities of British converts to Islam relate to understandings of patterns of belonging. It explores how converts may see themselves as both strange and familiar, and the grounds on which these are experienced. Rather than seeing them as 'in-between' majority society and Muslim communities

or as developing identities strategically with the goal of belonging, this thesis makes an analytical shift to explore what will be referred to as patterns of betweenness.

In multicultural Britain, it further considers how, in view of converts positioning themselves as both strange and familiar, this may be seen positively and therefore as a way of countering the exclusions that converts often face. As such, it evaluates what is necessary in order to think converts into the picture of what constitutes British and Muslim as opposed to 'bizarre' human beings. Here it engages with multiculturalism's central tenets of recognition and difference. Based on its arguments of converts as multicultural subjects, it presents an alternative perspective on these as substantial concepts to contribute to the theoretical issues of recognition of religious identities and to argue for the liberative potential and necessity of *difference*.

The following section of this introduction begins by setting the historical context of British converts to Islam. It then sketches the contemporary picture, highlighting points of overlap and difference with the historical background. The themes that are touched upon here will recur throughout the following chapters and have a particular bearing on understanding a multi-level analysis. The chapter summary to this introduction then sets out the main themes and approach of each chapter.

British converts to Islam: historical overview

Evidence suggests there were English soldiers who converted as far back as at least the 12th century and the time of the crusades (Jawad, 2012). The earliest named English convert in an English source dates to 1583, a son of a yeoman of the Queen's Guard, John Nelson (Matar, 1998; Gilliat-Ray, 2010). Numbers increased during the Elizabethan era, especially in Ottoman lands (Jawad, 2012; Matar, 1998) and in India (Gilham, 2014). Britons who converted to Islam and remained in Britain during this period remain a 'possibility' as little evidence exists to shed light on who they might have been or what their lives might have been like (Matar, 1998).

That Britons were converting to Islam at all at this time was met with great disbelief and concern, early attempts by English Christian travel writers to understand such conversions were attempts to find out how to better protect their countrymen from Muslims and Islam (Matar, 1998). It is from these early conversions, mostly a result of contact between the British and Ottoman empires, that the term to 'turn Turke' comes in order to refer in a derogatory manner to those converts (Matar, 1998: 23). Another term used to describe converts that also reflects this attitude was 'renegade'. More accurately the term was used in its Spanish form *renegado*,

reflecting an emphasis that “apostasy was typified by the Papist enemies of England” (Matar, 1998: 23). That is, it was an affliction of foreigners and not something for the English of the time. It has been argued that the patterns of conversion in this period were largely a result of force and coercion (Gilham, 2014), although the historical picture is more complex (Matar, 1998; Bulliet, 1979; Levtzion, 1979).

Much more is known about British converts to Islam from the Victorian era of the mid-nineteenth century, from which period far more in the way of writings survive (Geaves, 2010; Gilham, 2014; Jawad, 2012; Hermansen, 1999). This is not least in part because a number of converts were from the middle and upper classes. Hermansen, for instance, traces a number of dominant themes in pilgrimage narratives that “reflect the new mobility, in terms of resources and travel to exotic locations, of the Western middle classes” (Hermansen, 1999: 84). Many of these accounts, as a product of their time, reflect attitudes towards Islam also found in the colonial adventure travelogues of other writers, albeit without the same excesses and with greater respect and admiration for Islam, Muslim societies, and inner spirituality (Hermansen, 1999).

Notable in this regard was Henry Stanley, the first in “a new trend of the free conversion of Britons who remained Muslims by conviction in Britain” (Gilham, 2014: 243). Henry, who converted in 1859, later became the first Muslim member of the House of Lords (Lord Stanley of Alderley) (Gilham, 2014). Another prominent convert was Abdullah Quilliam, a Liverpool solicitor who converted in 1888. Quilliam was the first and only officially appointed Sheikh al-Islam of Britain, a title bestowed on him by the Ottoman Sultan and Caliph (Geaves, 2010). Quilliam founded the Liverpool Muslim Institute (LMI), “the first attempt to promote Islam publicly from within a mosque and an Islamic centre in Britain” (Geaves, 2010: 3), which was to be an important centre for converts, conversions and other rites of passage, as well as publishing the weekly newspaper *The Crescent* and quarterly journal *The Islamic World* (Geaves, 2010). The first purpose-built mosque, the Woking Mosque, which Quilliam was initially critical of although later associated with, wasn’t built until two years later.

Converts during this time were typically Christian by birth, predominantly male and middle-aged (although numbers of women grew in the post-war years), came from all classes in society, and were chiefly conservative in social and political outlook (Gilham 2014; Geaves, 2010). Gilham finds that affectional, experimental and intellectual motivations and orientations were the most common during the period (Gilham, 2014). Indeed, part of the appeal for Quilliam was the rationality of Islam, which “met the intellectual challenges of the period but also kept him in touch with the monotheistic deity”, ardent belief in which had formed in his childhood (Geaves, 2010: 39).

The reactions to these converts from the wider population, media and politicians were largely negatively prejudicial and oppositional, entailing mockery, disdain, social ostracism, and misunderstanding, at times manifesting in violence and intimidation. Muslims attending services at the LMI, for example, were pelted with stones and eggs and the building vandalised. Such animosity would be particularly pronounced at times of political heat between Britain and various parts of the Muslim world (Geaves, 2010; Gilham, 2014). The converts were also construed as transgressing ethnic and imperial hierarchies and as a threat to the moral fabric and racial purity of the nation (Gilham, 2014; Geaves, 2010). Other tropes included accusations of flaunting their new religion through dress, and Islam as backward and oppressive to women. Those few who were vocal, politically active and critical of British foreign policy were routinely monitored by authorities and treated with distrust and suspicion (Gilham, 2014; Geaves, 2010). This was not, however, criticism of Britain and Imperial Britain *per se*. It was rather in relation to Britain's changing relations with the Ottoman Empire and growing closeness to Russia, and therefore the future of Britain's alignment in the global polity. Indeed, many maintained a belief in the British Empire. Geaves comments on Quilliam that he showed "it was possible to be a Muslim who was highly critical of some aspects of British foreign policy, yet still remain intensely patriotic to one's country of birth" (2010: 189). Converts themselves stressed that being Muslim did not entail disloyalty to Britain and many of those who left Britain and spent time living abroad in Muslim majority lands eventually returned later in life to the land of their birth.

On a more everyday level, many were eager to stress commonalities between Islam and Christianity and their ability to coexist in Britain. In efforts at familiarity, institutions such as the LMI and Woking Muslim Mission used terms such as 'Muslim Church' and 'Muslim Bible' to refer to the mosque and Qur'an (Gilham, 2014). Furthermore, many of the activities at the LMI were adapted and tailored to fit in with and appeal to the working lives and traditions of the local population (Geaves, 2010; Gilham, 2015). Many, following Stanley, adopted a practical, pragmatic approach to being Muslim in Britain, negotiating adaptations of practices such as *salat* (the daily prayers) to fit in with British life patterns more easily (Gilham, 2014). Lady Evelyn (Zainab) Cobbold, reportedly the first British Muslim woman to complete the *hajj*, even continued to drink a little sherry (Gilham, 2014; Jawad, 2012).

On a more personal and religious level there is deep commitment and religious faith. Stanley, in a letter to his brother, remarked, "you know I have always been a Mussulman [sic] at heart" (Gilham, 2014: 30), and Cobbold likewise said, "It seems that I have always been a Moslem [sic]" (Jawad, 2012: 46). Hermansen also finds this sentiment in the conversion narratives from the twentieth century (Hermansen, 1999). For many, the appeal of Islam lay in its theology, in its simplicity and common sense in comparison to the doctrine of the Trinity in Christianity, and

in its orientation towards society - its classlessness, egalitarianism and concern with social justice (Gilham, 2014; Geaves, 2010; Hermansen, 1999).

British converts in this period remained, nevertheless, a fractured community. William Pickard, for example, complained in 1937 of isolation and a lack of a communal Islamic life (Gilham, 2014). These converts were to leave, nonetheless, a significant intellectual legacy and historical reference point for future generations, which has been furthered in the notable contributions of more recent converts such as Martin Lings, Charles le Gai Eaton and Abdal Hakim Murad (Tim Winter) (Jawad, 2012).

The significance of this historical overview lies in part in how this legacy and some of the themes that have begun to emerge provide context for understanding conversion to Islam in Britain today. There are numerous similarities as well as significant differences, both of which help us understand the contemporary picture, and which also develop the background for the literature under consideration in this thesis.

The contemporary picture

Over the last ten to fifteen years interest in conversion to Islam in Britain has increasingly become a subject of scholarly interest as well as a newsworthy topic. Demographics of converts in Britain today are difficult to determine with any accuracy and certainty. In part this is because of the simple and informal 'rite' of becoming Muslim. Also, there is no 'convert community' as such to speak of (Brice, 2008; Murad, 1997), although support networks have been developing in more recent years through groups in various cities, including a couple with national reach, online and through social media. There are no public records of conversions and mosques or community groups also do not typically keep records of conversions; there is no official religious or civic documentation involved, although converts can obtain certificates of conversion from certain organisations which can help obtain entry to Mecca for *hajj*. The census for England and Wales, while now including a question on religious affiliation, does not also include one for religion at birth, unlike the Scottish census. The best approximations are, therefore, based on extrapolations from the Scottish census and informal reporting from mosques. Within these limitations estimates vary at between approximately 15 000 (Birt, 2002) and 100 000, with up to 5000 new converts each year (although this figure doesn't allow for de-conversions) (Brice, 2010, 2007). Of these it is estimated that more than half are white British¹ and between two thirds and three quarters are female (Brice, 2010). In contrast to the period outlined above, and reflecting wider social changes in Britain, they are largely

¹ This compared with about 8% white for the British Muslim population more generally, see Muslim Council of Britain (2015).

from the now broader middle-class, with a substantial number of working-class background; their educational level is generally high; the average age seems to be below 30; and previous religious socialization is diverse but often low (Gilham, 2015; Köse, 1996; Zebiri, 2008; Jawad, 2012). These trends are also generally observed in other European countries (Roald, 2004; van Nieuwkerk, 2004; Wohlrab-Sahr, 2006; Özyürek, 2015).

When we look at the contemporary picture many of the themes of the historical sketch still have relevancy. Many of the reasons given for converting in the historical narratives are also found in contemporary convert narratives. Converts today likewise stress the conviction of the heart and of *being* Muslim, a deep spirituality and the idea of having always been Muslim, albeit unknowingly until conversion. The intellectual and affectional are similarly underlined as part of the appeal of Islam and its consistency with life in modern Britain. We see too the theological and the sociological present in their decisions to convert, highlighting the significance of a bridging approach to these.

Similarly, negotiating an Islamic life in Britain continues to be a challenge, as is negotiating identity, place and belonging. These points all suggest the centrality of issues of continuity and change on both personal as well as social levels. To greater or lesser extents present day converts also look for practical solutions to reconcile their faith with their social context in Britain. Perhaps at least in part for these reasons it has been argued that historical figures such as Quilliam remain important examples of negotiating identity and place for a British Islam and Muslims (Gilham, 2014; Geaves, 2010; Jawad, 2012).

There are also, however, significant differences between the context outlined in the historical picture and the contemporary one. Britain and Britain's place in the world, the world itself, is markedly different. The place of religion in public life has also become significantly different and weakened as the modern Elizabethan era has progressed. Britain is now more tangibly multi-faith, yet secular understandings of the place of religion and religious identities provide the dominant frames.

A further difference which significantly impacts converts is the changed landscape of Islam in Britain. With the expansion of the Empire, Muslim communities began settling in Britain during the 19th century but remained marginal (Gilliat-Ray, 2010). In the pre- and inter- world war years converts had been prominent, even foundational, in Muslim organisations, which were successful because of the prominence of these converts and their ability to communicate in a way seemingly not alien to British people (Köse, 1996). Following the Second World War and commonwealth immigration patterns, "British Islam' rapidly became Islam from the Indian subcontinent and the convert 'community' became increasingly marginalised" (Gilham, 2014: 238). This was as a result of the emerging Muslim population and their own cultural, social and

political interests and struggles, as well as the deaths of prominent converts. The current British Muslim population is estimated at around 5% of the total population (Muslim Council of Britain, 2015), with converts forming a “minority within a minority”, estimated at about 4% of that total (Brice, 2010).

Important also is the context of Britain and its legislative and state-civic race relations focus. Public funding could more readily be sourced based on ethnic and cultural traits, meaning that Muslim organisations presented a public face under these rather than religious banners (Nielsen, 1999), even if this did not necessarily reflect the centrality of religious identity during this period (Fazakarley, 2017). Much of this situation is reflected in who and what is meant when talking about Muslims in Britain. The concerns of multiculturalism, for example, are bound up with the Muslim population as it has emerged from these migration processes, found in the conceptions of ethno-religious and ethno-cultural. The conversion literature has also generally conceived British converts as ‘in-between’ majority society, on the one hand, and the minority Muslim population, on the other. The effects of this for converts form an important part of the discussion.

As a result of the shift in the Muslim population, converts’ routes to Islam and how this links to the practice of their new faith has also changed. For those coming to Islam for the first time in Britain, they are far more likely to be exposed to more orthodox practices straight away through contact with born Muslims than those who came to Islam through the LMI, who by contrast would have been exposed, at least initially, to a “diluted, syncretic Islam” (Gilham, 2015: 31). This forms one of the most salient differences between the current and historical context, and one which emerges continually and consistently between and within converts’ narratives: a divide between culture and religion (see also, Roald, 2006; Zebiri, 2008; Guimond, 2017).

We find also a parallel in the negative reactions that many face, who also, as Quilliam, “f[ind] out very painfully” that “conversion to Islam [i]s not simply an act of personal belief” (Geaves, 2010: 215). Contemporary examples of discriminatory reactions are evident and many of the same negativizing tropes are still held up to converts in Britain now, at least in parallel form, including essentialising discourses. Whereas earlier conversions may have been explained as being results of force, contemporary equivalents emphasise brainwashing, mental health issues or conversions of convenience in order to marry. What they are not in these perspectives are genuine religious conversions of conviction. The incompatibility of Islam and Britain also continues to plague converts through the trope of ‘betrayal’ of culture and values, despite converts arguing the contrary.

The image of the convert in the media and popular imagination has arisen as one associated with radicalisation and terrorism, with several high-profile attacks in Britain having been made by converts². The 'zealotry' of the convert thus takes on its fullest definition, shifting away from a more benign 'in love' stage (Roald, 2004, 2012). As such, the genuineness of both the conversion and of converts' intentions and motivations are questioned in four ways: first, as not a genuine religious conversion; secondly, as dangerous precisely because they are religious conversions, and to a religion already perceived as inclined to violence and oppression; thirdly, even if the physical threat is not so direct, they are dismissed as a result of falling in love or of personal instability; or, fourthly, they suggest processes of brainwashing.

These conversions then can carry a physical as well as cultural threat. Even when the physical threat is not so direct, conversions to Islam are still frequently dismissed as anomalous. 'Crisis' has been a dominant explanatory trope in the academic literature on religious conversion for decades, conversion being interpreted as a 'phase' by family members to cope with this reoccurred continually across the narratives of my participants³. This is not to suggest that conversions that can be understood in these ways do not occur, a few of my participants even mentioned other converts they knew of who had, for example, done so in order to get married. These, however, are a minority (Brice, 2010) and do not reflect the majority of British converts to Islam in contemporary Britain, or at least those that remain Muslim for any length of time. Such challenges to dominant and stereotyped perceptions are at the core of this thesis.

These negative reactions question the genuineness of both the conversion and of the convert's intentions and motivations, whether by seeing them instrumentally as deliberate strategies or by psychologizing and therefore reducing them to individual anomalies (see also Krotofil, 2011). Here a tempting contrast can be drawn between the language of a burgeoning threat posed by converts as religious and the well-documented decline in Christianity in a secular

² The murder of Lee Rigby in Woolwich and that on Westminster bridge being two examples. It is worth noting that a recent Policy Brief (Schuurman et al., 2016) suggests that converts are disproportionately overrepresented among 'homegrown jihadists' in the UK, being 12% of this figure but only around 4% of the total Muslim population. This is a more complex issue than there is space for here and is an area that requires research. A brief word of caution on these figures is required, nevertheless. The figures in this Policy Brief are taken from a Research Notes paper (Mullins, 2015), itself not directly addressing this exact question and having taken the figures from a report published by the Henry Jackson Society (Simcox and Dyer, 2013), a think tank with a controversial record on its stance towards Islam and Muslims. Francis and Knott (2017) have conversely argued that, in the UK at least, "there's no evidence that new Muslims in general end up more extreme than those born into Islam" (see also www.crestresearch.ac.uk).

³ De-conversion and disaffiliation occur undoubtedly, although again, this is an area that needs research. Alydreessy (2015) did attempt to address this in her study and spoke to 5 people who had 'de-converted', noting the difficulties they had reconciling their personal faith with social context in relation to society more generally and born Muslim communities more narrowly. 'Ex-Muslim' groups exist, including those strongly anti-Muslim, for those who have difficulty leaving the faith, although these tend to focus on born Muslims rather than converts given the difference on family and community pressures for this process. For a non-academic book that begins to ask these questions, see Mughal and Saleem (2018).

context. That is to say that on the one hand, with increasingly secular understandings of the state and the diminished place of religion in society, religious belief itself comes to be seen as more anachronistic and 'something private'. In this case we can see the absence of the religious aspect more broadly. In this context, converts are converting to a 'foreign' religion attached to a specific ethnic and cultural group, itself already negativized, and this heightens the levels of suspicion and questioning. It is against this background, and in these frames, that the convert emerges as a controversial public figure, his or her conversion often being portrayed as a kind of cultural or political betrayal (Zebiri 2008; Özyürek 2015). This generates issues around the good or bad faith of the convert's religious identity, which can further be seen in issues they face in acceptance from Muslim communities, where the genuineness of their motivations and identities, and their right to belong, may also be questioned. It is these issues that this thesis addresses directly.

Contextualising conversion

Conversion is both what we might call a personal spiritual awakening, but also involves some kind of entry and exit between religious or non-religious communities (Bryant and Lamb, 1999). Two themes and subsequent problematics markedly emerge from this. The first is the personal and religious aspects of these conversions. If we are to avoid and moreover to challenge the kinds of discriminatory discourses that routinely misrepresent and mischaracterise converts identities, often with harmful effects, these need to be reconceptualised. That is, the existing shortcomings in the literature that theorise religious identity predominantly through secular and cultural lenses needs to be rebalanced. In this, this thesis addresses the following from Grace Davie, who in the second edition of her book looking at religion in Britain since 1945 concludes with a challenge for sociologists:

"to rethink the foundations of their respective fields of study, in order to accommodate fully the implications of religion and religious issues in their analyses of modern societies. This, moreover, means accepting religion as it is, not as we would like it to be. Above all it must be driven by data, and the critical thinking that surround this, not by the overly secular assumptions of 'traditional' paradigms." (2015: 234)

What emerges prominently throughout the narratives under consideration is the dynamic relationship between continuity and change as a central problematic in order to make such a theoretical shift for thinking about converts' religious identity, and this forms the first main analytical framework.

The second main theme relates more directly, although not discretely, to belonging and registers a parallel discussion that imbricates the personal and the social. Here, the idea of

following a 'pure' Islam free of cultural baggage and un-Islamic cultural practices that owe more to non-religious tradition than Islamic precepts arises (Zebiri, 2008; Rogozen-Soltar, 2012). One prominent commentator has referred to this as 'deculturation' (Roy, 2010). Nevertheless, converts of course come from their own culturally embedded place and cannot be seen as 'culture free'. They inherit as well as contribute to wider cultural scripts. The religion-culture separation, therefore, forms the second central problematic of this thesis in order to address how conversion "constitutes a privileged observation point to study society, especially the complex framework linking together the individual and the socio-cultural contexts in which [s/]he is included" (Giordan, 2009: 1; also Heirich, 1977) rather than treating them as deviant variations from the status quo.

Chapter 2 sets out the theoretical orientation of the thesis in line with multiculturalism. It, moreover, highlights overlap between multiculturalism and the literature on conversion to Islam in terms of conceptualising identity. It points to short-comings in these conceptual and theoretical orientations for understanding British converts to Islam and religious identity. It argues for a foregrounding of religious identity in contrast to conceptualisations which (unnecessarily) secularize it or view it primarily through an ethnic lens. It also, however, highlights the relevance of multiculturalism as a framework within which to work and the conceptual justifications for this, notably its framework for difference and recognition. As part of this task it addresses some important criticisms of multiculturalism's approach in terms of identity and difference, discussing the approaches of interculturalism, everyday multiculturalism, and 'liberative difference'⁴.

Chapter 3 continues this but looks at the conversion literature in more depth and the frameworks used to understand converts and converts to Islam more specifically. It orients the discussion towards the religious aspect of conversion and brings in the relevance of theological considerations alongside those more sociological as important to approaching converts' subjectivities. It goes on to outline the alternative approach to the study of converts' identities that is adopted in this thesis, which draws on Simmel's notion of *religiosity*.

Chapter 4 then turns to a discussion of belonging in the literature of both multiculturalism and converts to Islam. Given the relation to multiculturalism and need to link personal with social processes, it puts this in the broader context of the place of religion in British society. It then considers the dominant ways for understanding the place or position of converts to Islam in British society in this light. This is particularly as they relate to majority society, which they supposedly 'leave', and Muslim communities, which they supposedly seek to 'join'. It critically

⁴ This part of the chapter has been published in extended version, see, Sealy, 2017.

discusses the effects of these concepts for how converts are positioned in society and outlines an alternative analytical approach drawing on Simmel's essay *The Stranger*.

These theoretical discussions continue in **Chapter 5**, which presents the methodological approach adopted for this study. This goes beyond describing and justifying methods, however. It further develops the theoretical approach to identity being used and extends the discussions in the previous chapters in this regard. It makes the case that a narrative methodology avoids the conceptual short-comings of oppositional or discrete identity categories. It further orients the discussion towards the two central problematics of the dynamics between continuity and change, and religion and culture that have been identified. It also discusses sampling, aspects of reflexivity, ethical considerations, and the position of the researcher.

Chapter 6 presents a discussion of the narratives focussed on thinking about identity. It brings Simmel's notion of *religiosity* and its relation to *religion* to bear on exploring continuity and change as they emerge in the narratives. It argues that in order to better understand complex identity processes and religious subjectivity, it is the dynamic between the two, rather than emphasising one over another, that must form the central problematic. It also develops a conversation between sociological and theological aspects as they pertain to this concern, doing so to show how converts' narratives develop a sense of coherence or congruity.

Chapter 7 turns to discussions of belonging based on the empirical material of the thesis. This chapter is shorter than the other chapters in this part of the thesis and primarily develops how converts are positioned by others. This is done as important background for the longer discussion in chapter 8.

Chapter 8 then brings an analytical framework built around Simmel's conception of the *stranger* to explore the dynamics of belonging in relation to the religion-culture problematic. This chapter focuses on a developed account of how converts position themselves in relation to Muslim communities and society more generally. It traces how converts develop senses of insiderness and outsiderhood in relation to majority society as well as born Muslims along the axes of religion and culture, and how they position themselves as both strange and familiar.

Chapter 9 then brings the previous discussions to bear on a more direct conversation with multiculturalism and its theoretical concepts of difference and recognition. It also considers the implications for thinking about issues of Islamophobia. It unpacks aspects of how converts both face Islamophobic discrimination and reproduce aspects of Islamophobic discourse. In line with the thesis as a whole, it does so by reorienting the discussion towards rather than away from the religious, and developing further the conversation between theological and sociological

aspects of conversion. It then goes on to situate these concerns in a discussion of the relation between the religious and secular.

Chapter 10 draws together and summarises the main threads and arguments of the thesis. It restates the case for considering British converts to Islam as unusual multicultural subjects and how the study as a whole offers a different perspective and raises new questions within multiculturalism. It concludes by suggesting potential areas of future research.

Chapter 2: The Multicultural Challenge

This chapter discusses multiculturalism and is particularly focussed on identity. It begins by first delineating which multiculturalism is being referred to and discusses the central conceptual resources, their relevance and also their shortcomings for this thesis. Moreover, this section relates this discussion of identity to the overlapping concepts in the conversion studies literature. It offers critical examination of both in relation to religious identity, setting out the space in which the contribution of this thesis, arguing that religious ontologies and epistemologies of belief need to be part of sociological conversations, is made. The response to why (this) multiculturalism is then developed further by discussing alternatives which have emerged as challenges to multiculturalism and its approach. Overall, it argues that multiculturalism and its tenets of recognition and difference provide a relevant framework, but that it falls short with regard to the foundation of difference with regard to converts' religious identities.

Mapping Multiculturalism

Within the now extensive literature multiculturalism is conceived differently in different historical and contemporary contexts. One immediate distinction is between 'multination' and 'polyethnic' models. The former is concerned with nations below the level of the state: indigenous groups in Australia or the Quebecois in Canada, for example, and of which Will Kymlicka's (1995, 2001) work on liberal multiculturalism is exemplary. Polyethnic models refer to immigrant groups in a post-immigration context. This is the multiculturalism we are talking about with reference to Britain, what has been called 'The Bristol School of multiculturalism' (Levey, 2018), and outlined by leading authors in this context such as Bhikhu Parekh, Tariq Modood and Nasar Meer. It is this model that this thesis, with its focus on Britain, is concerned with and makes a theoretical contribution to.

It is important to distinguish at this stage between a descriptive and normative use of the term, that is between *multicultural*, as an empirical description of social characteristics, and *multiculturalism*, as a substantive term referring to challenges and responses in a multicultural society (Hall, 2000). To register the former of these Hall defines what he calls *multicultural drift* to highlight the non-deliberate and unplanned changing in the people who make up "in all aspects of British social life... a natural and inevitable part of the 'scene'" - rather than an 'alien wedge'" as a result of post-WWII immigration patterns (Hall, 1999: 188; 2000; Hall and Back, 2009). Yet, drift alone is not enough. A substantive multiculturalism is also necessary to address structural factors of racism, and the need to combat it, that fall outside the scope of the term 'drift'. As Hall remarks, "outside of its [drift's] radius, the practices of racialized

exclusion, racially-compounded disadvantage... persist" (Hall, 1999: 188). Multiculturalism, then, forms variously normative, theoretical and policy positions.

Multiculturalism is inherently bound up with issues of identity and belonging. It places value on collectivities as well as individuals and along these lines emphasises the need to tackle discrimination of racially, ethnically and religiously marginalised groups in a way that policies premised on neutrality or 'blindness' and a public/private division cannot. This is based on the premises that collective senses of identities are subjectively important to people that hold them and, moreover, form important sites of social action in relation to the social context and demands for equality and recognition (Modood, 2007/2013; Young, 1990).

Recognition and difference are central concepts to multiculturalism's political project. Recognition of difference is necessary, "a vital human need" (Taylor, 1994: 26), for a society based on ideas of mutual respect and equality, not least because "the withholding of recognition can be a form of oppression" (Taylor, 1994: 36). Multiculturalism is committed to a dialogical and interactive cultural diversity in which different cultures are respected and valued. In this area the work of Parekh (Parekh, 2006) and Modood (Modood, 2007/2013) (including various collaborations) have provided the most coherent and defining contributions to challenge the assumptions and positions of classical liberalism and radical secularism as the best models for the British context. In this way, "multiculturalism refers to the struggle, the political mobilisation but also the policy and institutional outcomes, to the forms of accommodation in which 'differences' are not eliminated, are not washed away but to some extent recognised" (Modood, 2007: 39).

It is significant for my purposes that in large part multiculturalism in Britain has been concerned with ethnic minorities linked explicitly to post WWII immigration from former colonial states and resulting in Britain being a post-immigration "multi-ethnic, multi-faith, multicultural, multi-community society" (Parekh, 2000). Increasingly, and following high profile incidents such as the Rushdie affair, riots in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham, and 7/7 bombings, this has become more specifically attached to Muslims, defined by multiculturalism ethno-culturally and ethno-religiously. It will be a central argument of this thesis that converts as multicultural subjects contribute original insights for discussions of the core concepts of difference and recognition in the multiculturalism literature. This is particularly so with regard to religious identity.

It has been argued that with greater religious pluralism comes higher levels of religiosity (Lockett and Jelen, 2017: 5). Yet religiosity as a basis of thinking about difference has received scant attention, the focus instead being on ethnicity and culture. The significance of this is that it underpins much of the reason converts present a different perspective for consideration in relation to multiculturalism and as multicultural actors. The increasing numbers

of converts to Islam in Britain can be seen on the one hand as an aspect of multicultural drift, as Islam becoming 'part of the scene'. As Islam and Muslims have gained greater presence and prominence, what is from 'there' (being foreign, the margins) has provided social, cultural and psychic space and new and multiple emergent subject positions. It is the subject positions taken up by British converts to Islam that provide scope for unsettling how we think about these boundaries.

The following section turns to discuss some of the key concepts used in discussions and thought on identities in multiculturalism and its overlaps with the literature on conversion to Islam.

Identity: Frameworks of being

Using the term identity is widely recognized as problematic because it points to a principle of unity, obscuring complex formations and processes. Along these lines, and in a multicultural Britain, ideas around hybridity have been an important challenge to essentialised notions of identity. As well as the multiculturalism literature, the use of hybridity, and the related terms multiple and plural identities, are found throughout the literature on conversion to Islam (see Zebiri, 2008; Roald, 2004; Suleiman, 2013; Moosavi, 2013; Alyedreessy, 2016). There are numerous formulations of hybridity both historical and contemporary (see Iyall-Smith, 2008; Papastergiadis, 1997/2015) that may see it negatively or positively, as the discourse of the dominant maintaining that position or a route to inclusivity, as cultural mixing, as crossing or transgressing borders and boundaries, as opening up a 'third space', in Bhabha's (1994) well-known concept, and as description or process (Hutnyk, 2010). Where hybridity points to the fact that everything is hybridized, therefore dismantling the concept of purity and operating as a continual epistemological challenge, as far as there is still plenty of essentialism around, this is vitally important (Pieterse, 2001).

Nevertheless, the hybrid has been charged with triviality and, more seriously, not grappling with asymmetrical power relations. It has been argued that hybridization has too often done little more than append 'origin' to 'nation' as a hyphenated identity, as in British-Muslim, in a way which may retain a presumption of prior purity or unity (Caglar, 1997; Hutnyk, 2010; cf Bhabha, 1994). While this criticism may be fundamentally semantic (Anthias, 2001), it does highlight the need to problematise the relationship between territory, culture, ethnicity and so on (Caglar, 1997; Friedman, 1997/2015), as well as what hybridity "achieves, what contexts its use might obscure, and what it leaves aside" (Hutnyk, 2010: 62). The immediate question for this section is how the idea of hybridity is used in the multiculturalism and the conversion to Islam literatures, and, moreover, the implications for thinking about religious identity as part of the relationship hybridity points to.

Conceptualisations of hybrid, multiple or plural identities in the conversion to Islam literature are based on discrete categories, where Islam is seen, for example, as part of an “idiosyncratic mosaic, the separate parts of which would have to be ascribed to different categories” (Zebiri, 2008: 252). Along these lines, we find conceptions of religious identity premised on competition and incompatibility with a separate national category, where, for example, being or becoming Muslim dilutes (Zebiri, 2008; Jensen, 2008) or neutralizes ‘Britishness’ and vice-versa (Viswanathan, 1998). In these renderings the relationship between the hybridized parts is one in which the parts are conceived as discrete and in a subtractive relationship. Yet, the majority of converts, as Muslims more generally, report that no such conception is necessary for how they feel as both Muslim and British (Brice, 2010; Zebiri, 2008; also Cheeseman and Khanum, 2009; Karlsen and Nazroo, 2015⁵). What then becomes important is how hybridity is or becomes of consequence in the organisation of people’s lives in a specific social context and how these become detached from traditional forms and recombine to construct new forms and new practices (Friedman, 1997/2015). Stuart Hall, for example, sees hybridity as a form of agonistic, ambivalent and always incomplete cultural translation, a form of negotiation with the difference of the ‘other’ (Hall, 2000).

In terms of the multiculturalism literature, it is significant that the term ‘British-Muslim’ is primarily invoked to reference a hyphenated identity where Muslim is as much an ethnic and cultural marker as a religious one. In fact, even allowing that inclusion of a religion question from 2001 in the England and Wales census was largely a result of lobbying on the part of British Muslim organisations, “concerned that their religious identity should be regarded as a defining characteristic of their self-understanding and a meaningful category of difference affecting their socio-economic situation” (Gilliat-Ray, 2012: 113), ‘British-Muslim’ remains primarily ethnically and culturally marked, understood through the terms ethno-religious and ethno-cultural.

Given this ethno-religious understanding of Muslim identities, it can encompass a whole range of relations to Islam, covering a spectrum of believers and believers. It includes, for example, people with varying degrees of religiosity or belief, some who do not believe that much if at all, and in the popular imagination and patterns of discrimination, some whether they like it or not. This conflation between ethnicity, culture and religion is further evident in the seemingly oxymoronic term ‘Muslim atheist’ (Roy, 2010: 7; also Milani, 2018). There are good sociological reasons for this linked to Islamophobia, which are discussed at length in chapter 9. Yet converts necessarily problematize this conceptual ethnicization of the religious category. This is partly because, as a result, it does not include the estimated more than half of converts

⁵ see Soliman (2018) in relation to Muslims in Germany and Duderija (2007) for Muslims in Europe more generally.

who are white British (Brice, 2010). This becomes relevant when we think about the grounds on which difference and recognition are to be conceived. An initial reason for this is the social consequences and aspects of converts' experiences, notably in relation to Muslim communities, which will be picked up in the following chapters. This underlines a tension between, on the one hand, an understanding of 'Muslim' that is firmly sociological, and, on the other hand, one equally grounded in religious understanding. This tension between the religious and the cultural in conceiving identity is at the heart of this thesis and runs throughout the chapters, where the intention is not to emphasise one against the other, but rather to put them into a mutually enriching conversation in a way hitherto not undertaken.

On the one hand then, conceptions of hybrid identities as applied to British converts to Islam may see religious identity more or less benignly, as a one-of-many discrete category, even as 'secularized' (Roald, 2004), or in a form of oppositional relationship to other categories, particularly the national. On the other hand, religious identity may be reduced and folded into the ethnic and cultural. This thesis problematises and challenges these tendencies by bringing *religious* identity into the centre of the inquiry.

When it comes to religious identity, there are further issues to consider with relation to how hybridity is conceived. This is because: "the matrices of culture [or here religion] are also, for subjects themselves, the matrices of ethical value, responsibility, and shared sociality" (Werbner, 2001: 147). This serves to highlight how religion is central to many people's self-understanding, a point not lost in the literature (see Hall, 2000; Modood, 2007/2013; Thomas and Sanderson, 2011; Kraft, 2013). Nevertheless, hybridity and plural identities may have reductive consequences for the religious aspect of identities and struggle to capture a deeper meaning of this, that is, how religious subjects may "always [be] in the condition of God" (Bowker, 2015: 152). Studies focussed on young Muslims in Britain have highlighted how for many their religious Muslim identity is felt to be more important than a 'cultural' Muslim identity, and, moreover, that this is not in contestation with their national identity as British (Jacobson, 1997). DeHanas (2016) has suggested that hybridity may work well for people of Jamaican descent, but not for the Bangladeshi Muslims in his study. The religious aspect of identity is stressed here against both a secular society in which religion, and Islam in particular, has become increasingly seen as a problem, as well as against parents, grandparents and even peers whose interpretation of Islam is seen to be 'cultural' and not able to speak to their lives as young people in Britain. More specifically related to converts, Austin-Broos argues, "conversion is a cultural passage more robust" than the hybrid, the syncretic, and the bricoleurs of cosmopolitanism suggest (Austin-Broos, 2003: 2). These issues speak against conceptualizations where Islam would form just one discrete category or be more simply a proxy for ethnic identity.

In addition to a more personal or micro level dimension, there is also a political dimension. As well as the risk of continuing to rely on discrete categories, hybridization can also risk “favouring an excessively fluid and contingent image of difference”, obscuring ways in which aspects of identity can become ‘concretized’ in specific contexts (Colombo, 2010). Brubaker (2004) identified what he termed *groupness* to register how collective group identities arise in relation and reaction to a context. An earlier formulation to this effect can be seen in what Spivak called ‘strategic essentialism’ (Spivak, 1990), a concept we can see further developed in Werbner’s distinction between *objectifications*, as the situational highlighting of positive identities in certain contexts, and *reifications*, as the violent fixing of subordinated identities (2013: 410). These formulations focus on recognising difference and thinking *with* the social, political, cultural and psychological processes that go into the construction of groups in processes of ethnicization and racialization. These identities have a ‘reality’ at the time but remain flexible and can escape essentialization and reification. There are significant historical and political reasons for this. One that has produced a significant literature has been the Rushdie affair, following which, for example, it has been suggested that many Muslims thought of themselves, at least in a public sense, as Muslims for the first time (Modood, 2007). As a result, Muslims have had to discover how to be a Muslim and strategies to reconcile a faith-based identity, rights and citizenship in a society that is suspicious of such identities in public (Geaves, 2005). Furthermore, it recognises that within the category ‘Muslim’ a variety of positions are taken across historical, moral and political standpoints, exemplifying the fallacy of homogeneity (Modood, 2010, 1997).

An overly fluid account that threatens to dissipate heritage or to dissolve categories through positing the outright rejection of essentialised forms may be seen to pose as much of a threat as a form of essentialism itself. Without precluding their processual and constructed character, how far “identities matter, deeply, and are long-term” (Werbner, 2002a: 267) needs to be recognised. Moreover, through engaging with the civic and political order “religious minorities both incorporate and are incorporated into the civic culture” (Werbner, 2000: 316; also, Modood, 2007; Laurence, 2012). This recognition can in turn play a part in the developing and changing of that order (Werbner, 2000; Modood, 2007), not least because “tradition is an eminent part of the motivational prism of social agents” and is itself permanently under reform (Amir-Moazami & Salvatore, 2003: 55).

In summary, central to identity and multiculturalism are difference and recognition, which link the personal, social and political. These are important hinges that orient the theoretical orientation for the considerations of this thesis. Nevertheless, we have also begun to see how existing concepts for thinking about identity are not able to capture significant aspects of religious identity and difference on these terms, highlighted by considering converts to Islam. In

the following chapters I will discuss additional theoretical and analytical approaches that will be adopted as complementary to this task.

First, however, given that this thesis situates itself firmly in orientation to multiculturalism, and provides a critical appraisal of multiculturalism vis-à-vis religious identity, it is necessary to turn to how multiculturalism has for many become a very unfashionable way of conceiving the problems of the social world as well as a political and theoretical response to addressing identities and inequalities within it. The following section takes up three such critiques. Those of advocates of interculturalism, 'everyday multiculturalism', and 'liberative difference'. Given the orientation of this thesis, this is done with reflection on the concepts of identity, difference and recognition in order to do two things: first, it consolidates and extends the framework of multiculturalism as relevant for the concerns of this thesis; second, through assessing the resources these alternatives offer for thinking about identity and difference, it develops further the view of difference and religious identity begun above. These considerations are furthermore important given the argument for a multi-level analysis because the critiques to be considered offer alternative macro and micro views.

The Multicultural challenged⁶

Studies of interculturalism and everyday multiculturalism share a focus and primary concern with the quotidian aspects of what is called a 'lived' multiculturalism, and that macro-level multiculturalism at best needs to be ignored in preference of a micro-level approach and, at worst, needs to be replaced. Stemming from this, two central ways in which these approaches differentiate themselves from multiculturalism are through their approaches to identity and difference, emphasising a plurality of many and fluid identities, and an emphasis on contact and contact zones in which difference is negotiated and identities are transformed.

Despite these significant cross-overs, there are also important differences. Most notably they start from quite different assumptions with regard to their shared central concept of 'contact'. For interculturalism (Cantle, 2012, 2016a/b) such contact must be fostered as multiculturalism is viewed to have created 'parallel lives'. For everyday multiculturalism such contact already exists in a more complex empirical reality than multiculturalism does not and cannot account for. Because of this important difference, the first section below will consider interculturalism separately. The following sections will then go on to consider everyday multiculturalism and point to conceptual overlaps with interculturalism. A final section then serves as an extension as well as summary as it considers a newer and different challenge to multiculturalism, that of 'liberative difference'.

⁶ The rest of this chapter has been published in extended version, see, Sealy, 2017.

Overall, the remainder of this chapter argues that the challenges to be discussed in the following not only do not offer a convincing alternative framework or conceptual apparatus to multiculturalism when it comes to thinking about identity and difference, but that they would actually impoverish these concerns.

Interculturalism and community cohesion: the macro challenge

Just as there are multiculturalisms, plural, so too there are interculturalisms, which, as explicit theoretical challenges, have produced significant and ongoing direct engagement between multiculturalists and interculturalists (see Cantle, 2016a, 2016b; Modood, 2016; Meer, Modood and Zapata-Barrero, 2016a; Modood, 2017a; *Comparative Migration Studies* Special Issue, Levrau and Loobuyk (eds), 2018). In addition to this engagement between multiculturalists and interculturalists, there have been debates about their complementarity (Thomas, 2011) and the enduring existence in policy if not in rhetoric of multiculturalism (Heath and Demireva, 2013; Meer and Modood, 2014; Mathieu, 2017).

Given my focus on the context of Britain, the model of interculturalism under consideration here is that developed by Ted Cantle. Cantle's interculturalism has become the dominant conception engaged in this debate in Britain and in this context the most widely influential challenge in the academic literature as well as in governmental public policy initiatives. This model is positioned to offer a direct theoretical and normative challenge to multiculturalism in the British context. It is claimed to be superior to and a replacement for multiculturalism models by prominent authors such as Modood and Parekh.

In what became known as the Cantle Report (Cantle, 2001), following the 2001 urban riots in Oldham, Burnley and Bradford, what it termed 'parallel lives' were highlighted, arguing that high levels of segregation between communities underlay social problems. As Cantle developed his model of interculturalism, he saw multiculturalism as having allowed and encouraged such separation, creating a context of a 'plural monoculturalism'. For Cantle, multiculturalism was no longer fit for purpose and unable to respond to the context of the super-diversity (Vertovec, 2007) of contemporary British society (Cantle, 2012, 2005, 2016a/b). Nevertheless, the empirical reality, conceptual characterization of 'parallel lives', or the causes of such segregation (where it may exist) are disputed (see Finney and Simpson, 2009; Jivraj and Simpson, 2015; Phillips, 2006; Singh, 2004; Thomas and Sanderson, 2012). What these critiques share and highlight is that interculturalism ignores structural patterns of racism and inequality. It is not my intention here to enter these debates directly. Rather, in

what follows, and in line with the focus of this chapter, I wish to focus on how identity is thought about in Cantle's interculturalism.

Interculturalism and identity

On the issue of identity Cantle states that "the key difference between multiculturalism and interculturalism generally revolves around the way in which personal and collective identities are conceptualised and instrumentalised" (Cantle, 2016b: 140). Interculturalism is critical of two aspects of multiculturalism's approach to identity issues. It is, firstly, deeply sceptical about the idea of national identity as a basis for solidarity and inclusion, charging multiculturalism with being out-of-date and not able to provide a more cosmopolitan basis for identity and solidarity (2012, 2016a). Secondly, it is critical of a form of identity politics which, it holds, reifies categorical singularities against empirical multiplicities. Cantle argues that identities in this way remain "fixed and given, rather than transitory and chosen—they are fundamentally about past heritage, rather than future personal and collective development" (2012: 30). For Cantle, multiculturalism's view of difference is a barrier to greater inclusion, integration and social harmony.

These assertions about a future-forward orientation at the expense of the past are, however, problematic. This apparent history-blind identity-neutrality risks being ahistorical and apolitical. Attention to cosmopolitanism's own history and context recognizes that such discourses are not a kind of "freedom from belonging", but are themselves "a special sort of belonging, [not] a view from nowhere or everywhere rather than from particular social spaces" (Calhoun, 2003: 532). This is especially relevant when we consider that it was under Empire in which cosmopolitanism for Britain was first formulated (Vietan, 2007, cited in Yuval-Davis, 2011: 150).

On the individual level of identity, Cantle deplores what he sees as (borrowing from Sen), the 'miniaturization' of people and their identities, where one identity category, such as a religious identity, is mobilised around to the ignorance of identity's multiplicity and to potentially dangerous (violent) consequences (Cantle, 2012, 2016a/b; Sen, 2006). For Cantle, this issue arises as a result of the fact that in an era of globalization and super-diversity, individual identities are too protean in character.

These positions are questionable on both theoretical and empirical grounds. Cantle stresses the individuality and chosenness of identities and opines (demands?) that "what multiculturalists have to learn is that plural identities are not in conflict with one another" (2016a: 479). Nevertheless, there is a tension in Cantle's position as, while he (rightly) stresses the non-

conflictual aspect of plural identities, he seems to lay the blame for separateness squarely at the feet of multiculturalism and minorities for somehow stubbornly resisting the reality of this plurality. This misses three things. The first is that studies show that minorities are more likely than white British citizens to positively identify with the national category 'British' when conceived civically (Jivraj, 2013; Nandi and Platt, 2015). The second is that multiculturalism as it exists in Britain has, in fact, been built on a far more bottom-up process of claims to a multicultural citizenship than top-down imposition (Levey, 2018). It is about, to quote one of its chief exponents, "multiculturalizing it [Britain] from the inside, ie., by citizens" (Modood, 2017b: 10). Moreover, for many Muslims, a religious identity has been central to these claims (Werbner, 2005, 2012). This highlights rather than diminishes the significance of a politics of difference (Young, 1990). What follows is that telling people who have fought for political recognition on particular grounds of religion or ethnicity, in a context that has discriminated and excluded them on those grounds, that these identities are without empirical reality and should therefore be abandoned or reduced seems to miss the point. Nothing in this suggests as a matter of necessity that plurality of identity is inherently conflictual. It is rather to draw attention to the lived experience of identities in relations of power, and recalls Werbner's distinction between reification and objectification (2013). The third, following from this, is how the emphasis on 'chosen' and 'fluid' personal identity processes misses ways in which social and political identity categories may be 'involuntary' (Meer, 2008 – discussed in detail in chapter 9). That is, they are sociologically ascribed identities manifested through patterns of discrimination. There is nothing inherently in multiculturalism that denies multiple identities—far from it. Its concern is with the political and social salience of such identities in context and matters of equality directly relating to them.

Furthermore, the unfortunate effect of multiplying identities in the way Cantle advocates is that it is reductive of certain identities that some people claim to be, and experience as being, overarching or fundamental. As has already been noted, for many religious people their religious identity would be just such a fundamental part of their identity and irreducible to other categories. The reduction of identities into side-by-side categorical multiplicity and fluidity fails to recognize how culture and also religion are 'real' (Werbner, 2005). Interculturalism has little to say about the religious and it is far from clear that it possesses the language to be able to accommodate such positions and epistemologies.

The problem is that interculturalism here over-emphasizes commonality such that it is not able to recognise and accommodate difference within its normative and conceptual framework. If, as Taylor has argued, a result of misrecognition is that "a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion" (1994: 25), it remains unclear how this conception of cosmopolitan identity is able to address this. It, in fact, seems that the normative project of this kind of intercultural cosmopolitan identity reproduces in its very formulation this type of

misrecognition. This is perhaps particularly so for a deeply held religious identity, which cannot be drawn exclusively into cultural, sociological and political terms precisely because of its existential difference.

Another alternative approach that has gained much prominence in relation to thinking the multicultural has been that of everyday multiculturalism. The following section now takes up the contributions of this literature.

The everyday of multicultural identities: a micro alternative?

The literature in the area of 'everyday multiculturalism' is now broad. There are, however, a number of conceptual features that those researching in this area share, and which are elaborated by its leading figures. 'Everyday multiculturalism' can, therefore, be seen as representing a broad 'family orientation' within the literature. (Other names for the concept, notwithstanding minor differences, follow a similar notion, for example, 'commonplace diversity' (Wessendorf, 2013) or 'everyday cosmopolitanism' (Noble, 2009a).)

Everyday multiculturalism has been defined as "a grounded approach to looking at the everyday practice and lived experience of diversity in specific situations and spaces of encounter" (Wise and Velayutham, 2009: 3). The focus is to look at how, in super-diverse contexts, difference is used and negotiated by social actors in everyday encounters in the social world. This is seen as a way of "reinstating the dynamic, complex nature of the concept of difference and its processual nature" (Semi et al., 2009: 69) against the more abstract theorisations of multiculturalism. It is important to stress that this body of literature does not, unlike interculturalism, position itself as a normative replacement for multiculturalism. It is micro and ethnographic in its empirical approach and does not always explicitly link to normative concerns. It might therefore be conceived as offering an epistemological break with macro theories represented by a common orientation. Nevertheless, as one commentator working in this area has noted "the everyday multiculturalism approach developed from and remains united by its critique of official multiculturalism" (Anna, 2018: 74). At a conceptual and empirical level, we can see a relation which would seem to question multiculturalism's orientation and theoretical positions vis-à-vis ethnic and religious diversity. We may already read this from the above definitions seeing it as a 'grounded' approach 'reinstating' dynamics and complexity. The unarticulated premise in these sentences being that hitherto approaches were not sufficiently based in people's lives and experiences and were therefore static.

In terms of this relation, it is at times explicit and at times more implicit. Where it is explicit, the aim is to provide empirical substance, seen as lacking, to work on an understanding of the

multicultural, thereby alerting us to the “complex picture of inter-ethnic relations and solidarities” (Hudson et al., 2009: 213). In contrast, multiculturalism has been referred to by leading authors in this field as “a top-down perspective... dominated by macro-theoretical approaches” (Wise and Velayutham, 2009: 2). As a result, it is seen as detached from the complex realities of everyday lives (Wise and Velayutham, 2009; Noble, 2009b; Anna, 2018). In this way multiculturalism creates “unmoveable and unalterable” reified differences which “necessarily come into conflict” (Semi et al., 2009: 66–67; Noble, 2009a). For some there is a disconnect, or even a “clash” (Semi et al., 2009: 66–67), between macro-discourses and lived, quotidian experiences of multiculturalism, arguing for instance that young people live “in the shadows” of theoretical and political debates (Butcher and Harris, 2010: 450; see also Berg and Sigona, 2013). It has already been noted that the characterization of multiculturalism’s normativity, seeing it as a top-down imposition, is misplaced and a mischaracterisation which perhaps more simply betrays a methodological preference for ethnographic study (see Wise and Noble, 2016).

At other times, however, the relation to multiculturalism is more implicit than these direct characterizations and lies in its shared concepts and empirical orientation. It is a reading of this implicit relation that the following sections discuss, especially because, by virtue of being implicit, there may in fact be an argument here for complementarity rather than challenge. Significantly, however, these follow similar lines of emphasis regarding identity and difference to interculturalism. It will be argued that the conceptual resources this literature offers do not help us understand religious identity as that will be elaborated in this thesis.

Encounters in contact zones

The first defining ideas are those of ‘the encounter’ mediated in ‘contact zones’ as part of the everyday practice of multiculturalism. Contact zones and contact are fundamental for identity work in this literature as it is in contact zones and through encounters that identity is continually practised and comes into being. The ‘conviviality’ seen expressed in such praxis is conceived as being ontological (Wise and Noble, 2016).

‘Contact zones’ (including physical and ‘sensuous’ contact zones) that have been the focus of research in this area include shared public or semi-public spaces, examples being cafés, parks, food courts and markets. These studies aim to explore the everyday complex multicultural interrelations that take place between people in these spaces. They chart the “fluid and cross-cutting” identities produced through encounter and against what are seen as more unwieldy macro level discussions (Wise, 2009). While views of identity and difference may then share certain assumptions on the importance of contact with interculturalism, in contrast, this does not

begin from the premise of 'parallel lives'. Rather, it suggests that contact is already taking place out of sight of political theory (Neal et al., 2015). As such they are primarily focussed on an effort "to illuminate larger or more general social processes" through showing the "*quieter ways*" (Watson and Saha, 2013: 2020, 2025, *italics in original*) that people live together.

This itself, however, indicates a particular normative position; that is, there is a distinct and deliberate bias toward positive relations that sits in direct contrast to discourses which see diversity as a challenge. Diversity here is something to be negotiated by individuals through developing skills and tactics. As such, despite discourses of racism being present, Wessendorf, for example, states in relation to her study in Hackney: "the focus of this book lies on the everyday lived reality of diversity and not on racism" (2014: 24). The challenge of discourses of racism as part of lived reality, although given some discussion, is resultantly side-lined. Moreover, despite recognising that public funded institutions played a pivotal role in bringing people into contact, Wessendorf also deliberately side-lines them in favour of a position that people can and do just get on with it (Wessendorf, 2014: 169). What is at issue here is not that people do develop and employ such tactics, but that this is not sufficient for addressing the dynamics of racism and discrimination occurring in these spaces. In fact, Wise, a leading author in the everyday multiculturalism literature, has more recently talked about needing "to take better account" of such discourses as they coexist with positive interactions, having "bracketed" these concerns (Neal, 2015: 999). In more recent work, Wise and Noble (2016) have sought to expand the conceptualisation of 'conviviality' to better reflect this (see also Neal et al., 2013). It remains, nevertheless, insufficient in regard to the discussion presented here as it continues to rest on the same assumptions about identity and contact.

As well as 'contact' itself, we can also see this positive bias in the definition of the 'contact zone'. The 'contact zone' is defined as "the 'space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations'" (Wise, 2009: 22, quoting Pratt, 1992). Absent from the framing as it appears here, however, is the point Pratt was quite insistent on, that these take place "within radically asymmetrical relations of power" (Pratt, 1992: 7; also 1991). Moreover, the problematising of 'separated' is insufficient as it obscures connected histories and the development of diversity in these 'zones'. These points have effects for how patterns of racism and conflict are dealt with. While mentioned and described, they remain insufficiently critically engaged, often having the appearance of a caveat to the more sustained emphasis on positive skills. There is the all-too-present risk that these approaches remain trapped in and limited by a "certain descriptive naivety" (Valluvan, 2016: 2). Contrary to some claims made for it, therefore, they lack transgressive conceptual force.

Civil inattention

Alternatively, these 'contact zones' are identified as spaces which "may facilitate an equality of presence" and where multiculturalism is "the unexceptional 'is' of social relations" (Neal et al., 2015: 464). A key characteristic of what constitutes multiculturalism here is akin to 'civil inattention', and the material conditions of these spaces conducive to it (also Wilson, 2011). Similarly, Jones et al. (2015) argue that in some spaces (they focus on corporate spaces of leisure and consumption) "civil inattention is the most pronounced mode of social interaction". Civil inattention is seen as an ethic which facilitates the practicalities of living together in urban spaces. In this case a non-political recognition of difference produces an everyday indifference to difference which enables people to live alongside one another in relative and unremarkable harmony.

Underlying this conceptualisation of contact is a conflation between 'contact' and 'co-presence'. Civil inattention is in itself viewed as a positive recognition of other people's right to privacy in public space. In this way, however, the definition of 'contact zone' remains limited to a hopeful potentiality. While indifference "*potentially* affords wider rights to and freedoms in the city" (Tonkiss, 2005: 10, emphasis added), urban spaces and the people that move in them are not neutral. This is because "public feelings of empathy or aversion towards the stranger... are shown to be instantiations of a slew of personal and collective labelling conventions—inherited, learnt, absorbed and practised—that flow into the moment of encounter" (Amin, 2012: 5). Indifference, as a result, can come with "overtones of hidden aversion" (Simmel, 1997b [1903]: 180) and the street can be "a thicket of social codes and potentially risky contacts" (Tonkiss, 2005: 71–72).

While an ethic of indifference may hold as a form of inattention that allows people to 'rub along' (Watson, 2006), this can be fragile (Husband, in Husband et al., 2014). For along with everyday multiculturalism, there exists everyday sexism, everyday racism and everyday Islamophobia. Significantly, however, in these renderings 'everyday' signals not the banality of inattention and rubbing along, but the banality of discrimination precisely because of its inscription in social structures and institutions. In important ways the city, and the nation, is gendered and ethnicized, both physically and as imagined. The freedom to it is consequently conditioned and 'read' differently by different people (Fenster, 2005; Husband et al., 2014). For these reasons, the city's public and semi-public spaces are "not natural servants of multicultural engagement" (Amin, 2002: 967). The benefit of these approaches to the everyday is that they expose these modes of discrimination and offer a route to challenging them. It is unclear how everyday multiculturalism understandings are able to conceptually approach identities and difference that are not so 'indifferent' and, moreover, how these will contribute to debates on social inequalities.

Contact, whose contact?

Leading on from these conceptual issues, empirical evidence for the endurance of the 'encounter' and its scalability demands more careful scrutiny (Amin, 2012). 'Contact theory' has often returned differing results precisely because "encounters never take place in a space free from history, material conditions and power" (Valentine, 2008: 333; also Swanton, 2010). In order to be able to disrupt dominant narratives and develop meaningful contact, everyday interaction research, where it does not do this, is unable to escape the problems it sets out to problematize. It subsequently is unable to adequately address complex aspects of individual and collective identities and remains, as interculturalism, hampered rather than freed by the multiple, fluid and indifferent. The definition of contact zone masks rather than elucidates complexities in relation to the sociocultural context. Identity itself is not a socially neutral concept and, to important extents, is structured by forces and relations in wider society. Amin argues that co-presence and collaboration are very different things and that it is the frames and terms of encounter that demand attention rather than the encounter itself (Amin, 2012; see also Karlsen and Nazroo, 2015; May and Sleeter, 2010). This alerts us to the fact that everyday multiculturalism is unevenly distributed (Ho, 2011) and remains trapped as a matter of potential. There is the need for considerable investment in cultivating positive and fruitful contact (Thomas, 2007; Wilson, 2013).

Valentine further notes a disconnect between how positive local encounter may affect dispositions towards cultural others as individuals, but that this change will not necessarily extend to ideas of groups. Similarly, Murdock observes that "familiar in-group members tend to be classified trait-based ('who they are') and for non-familiar out-group members category-based classification is applied" (2016: 324). While someone from the dominant cultural group may have a good personal, everyday relationship with black or Muslim colleagues or neighbours, for example, this does not automatically or necessarily preclude reifying and racist attitudes to unknown, imagined others. Moreover, work in social psychology has argued that, even where intergroup contact improves the attitudes of those of the majority cultural group towards minorities, a concomitant attitude to support social policies that would directly produce social change leading to equality does not follow (Dovidio et al., 2007). If social identities and socio-cultural differences are reinforced through continuity and repetition (Wilson, 2013), there is no reason why civil inattention will necessarily overcome cultural separation or discrimination. Thus, an emphasis on both shared commonality and indifference miss the mark. It is precisely here that multiculturalism becomes important as it becomes apparent that eschewing thinking about collectivities can come up short in relation to the challenges of multicultural society.

What the discussion reinforces is that 'drift' is not enough. Quotidian approaches are "particularly commensurate" with the task of "seeing value in understanding social patterns rather than their casualties" (Meissner, 2015: 558) and they may offer the opportunities to "link the smallest story to the largest social transformation" (Back, 2015: 834). These are without doubt valuable tasks and offer much to our understanding of diversity in people's everyday lives and the social world we inhabit. Nevertheless, while indifference as an urban ethic might be a minimum requirement, it falls significantly short of the type of enduring and ongoing relations that many advocates of contact theory would want to uphold, and even shorter of a stronger ethic. Suggestions that inattention or a positive gloss toward more interaction as automatically a good thing are misplaced and risk a depoliticized flattening of that diversity. Meissner (2015) is correct that it need not be antagonistic in this sense. This therefore questions the more explicit and reaching claims that such approaches have usurped, or perhaps less aggressively simply replaced, the space vacated by multiculturalism (cf. Berg and Sigona, 2013).

Following the discussion so far it remains unclear if and how practice and 'coming into contact' causally and consequently 'establish ongoing relations'. Questions therefore persist about who comes or does not come into contact with whom, where this happens and where it does not happen, what kind of contact is taking place, and how this may, or may not, be constitutive of social transformations and identity.

Both interculturalism and everyday multiculturalism are based on an approach to identity that over-emphasises individual praxis and the multiple and fluid. This remains insufficient for thinking about religious identity as I have begun to conceive it as it too would restrict it to a discrete category and does not take seriously enough the idea of difference as something other than a problem to be solved. What is at issue here is not contact or the spatiality of contact zones per se, I am resolutely not against these or the potential of great insights based on spatial analyses or spaces as sites for analysis. Rather, the issue is with what problems this contact is supposed to resolve and in what ways, and how these spaces are normatively conceived in this literature. Both accounts are inadequate in the task of conceptualising identities and sufficiently situating them in social relations.

What this discussion of the contact zone signals is that spatial difference (as geographical separation) and social distance (as cultural separation) cannot be folded into one another straightforwardly. This is not least as it precludes other processes that cut across spatial patterns (Amin, 2002). Therefore, while "a failure to move critiques of multiculturalism on from nationally framed ... and abstract models of identity and belonging" may remain at risk of being ignorant of the challenges, complexities and possibilities highlighted by the everyday (Clayton, 2009: 482), an equal failure is if such accounts do not, in turn, speak to the

nationally framed models in which they are situated, and the 'old' categories that continue to be significant (Aptekar, 2017), therefore failing to take a relational approach and see how multicultural policies themselves might, in fact, be transformative of those identities (Uberoi, 2008).

What is needed is to be able to move away from the privileging of groups and categories as they are at the same time interrogated and given salience. This is not least as some research suggests, with caution, that an identity and difference conscious multiculturalism, in contrast to a colour-blind approach, can have more positive implications for addressing discrimination (Plaut et al., 2018). Relations between 'subject' positions, those taken up as their own, and 'object' positions, those put into by others, need to be brought out. It is, for example, a central position of Modood's multiculturalism that positive identity-making and assertiveness, held and led by minorities themselves, can challenge inferiorised negative minority identities. In this way difference is negotiated and re-imagined by "not the erasure [or flattening] of difference but its transformation into something for which civic respect can be won" (Modood, 2007: 41).

Liberative difference and the fusion of horizons

To draw this chapter to a close, consideration of a third challenge to multiculturalism, that by Shannahan (2017), will help clarify the position I have been developing throughout this chapter and further orient my position towards religious identity vis-à-vis multiculturalism.

Shannahan's approach is, as everyday multiculturalism, rooted in the quotidian in order to "humanise arid debates about multiculturalism, placing people at the centre rather than policy agendas" (2017: 421). It does so, however, from the position of pairing sociological approaches with urban theology (see also Shannahan, 2010), centralising religious identity. It therefore represents a very different approach to identity and difference from interculturalism and everyday multiculturalism in its centralising of difference and of a religious epistemology.

Significantly, this approach reconceives multiculturalism as a theological principle "which reflects the character of a God who rejoices in difference" (Shannahan, 2010: 43). Along these lines, Shannahan, in a direct critique of interculturalism, also argues for engagement with political theology as a move towards a "hermeneutics of liberative difference" to "rescue diversity from the hegemony of assimilationist community cohesion narratives" (Shannahan, 2017: 426). Drawing on the political theology of three thinkers, Shannahan develops his hermeneutic of liberative difference to problematize the way difference is understood and handled, but without the presumption that difference is itself a problem to be solved. He argues for recognition of multiple epistemologies rather than a flattening of multiple identities.

Through the analogy of the dub practice of Jamaican dancehall musicians, Shannahan both preserves the theological root while opening conceptual space for the dynamic, complex and processual character of modern identities and practices in contemporary society. This appreciation of difference proceeds dialogically based on a 'risky hospitality', in turn based on blurred boundaries of mutuality to subvert insider/outsider binaries. This, notably, is rooted in social justice; his urban theology is quite explicitly a "bias to the oppressed" in order to "empower marginalized urban communities" (2010: 224, 85). Moreover, alongside a recognition of multiplicity, he argues for a "re-imagined catholicity that holds together our commonality and uniqueness" (2017: 423).

I am in closer agreement with Shannahan's underlying normative position towards difference than that of either interculturalism or everyday multiculturalism discussed above. This is because difference, rather than the problem to be solved, is the source from which liberative potential can and should develop. Furthermore, I welcome his theological intervention. Nonetheless, this is better positioned as complementary to multiculturalism for two reasons. The first is certain reservations about taking Shannahan's approach too generally. That is, despite foregrounding the religious in relation to the cultural, to do so potentially risks a misrecognition of its own if its result was to, for instance, reify and flatten the identity Muslim, albeit religiously rather than sociologically. The concept of the 'cultural Muslim' has recently begun to be elaborated in part as a criticism of the approach to the category 'Muslim' in much Islamic Studies literature, for instance (Milani, 2018). It is the relation between the religiously and sociologically oriented emphases in understanding that needs to be explored in greater depth rather than replacing one with the other. Furthermore, the biblical foundations of Shannahan's conceptual and theoretical work, his characterizations of God and interpretations of Jesus' ministry, would need to be brought into a broader hermeneutical framework if the goal of "forg[ing] a new model of intercultural and inter-faith liberative praxis" (Shannahan, 2010: 45) is to be realized. That is not to suggest that this is not possible, a similar theologically based position on dialogue and its Qur'anic basis has also been made (see, for example, Kurucan & Kasim Erol, 2012). It is to say that Shannahan's intervention is an important part of the puzzle of addressing religious identity and difference but not the puzzle itself.

Additionally, the type of dialogical hermeneutics Shannahan asks for is already present in multiculturalism, which may be better placed as a framework to develop not just inter-faith and intra-faith dialogue, but also dialogue between faith and non-faith partners. We can find this in Taylor's (1994) seminal essay where he draws on the Gadamerian concept of horizons to form its dialogical basis. While recognition has been a central term for multiculturalism, this Gadamerian foundation has not been much elaborated in the literature. It is through an understanding of what is meant by horizons and the fusion of horizons that this dialogical basis

gains its depth. That is, it both recognizes 'value pluralism' (see Meer et al., 2016b citing Isaiah Berlin) and accounts for political context and power relations (Meer et al., 2016b; also Young, 1990). This means recognising 'being-value' (Gadamer, 2013 [1960]: 246) and investigating this situated in social and political relations.

Our horizons are our "range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point" (Gadamer, 2013 [1960]: 313). Underlying horizons are prejudices. It is important to realize here that prejudice for Gadamer can have either a positive or negative value. For Gadamer, prejudices are the fore-meanings of how "we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live" (2013 [1960]: 289). These are brought to the tasks of interpreting and understanding before other elements that may affect those tasks have been examined. This is an important part of the dialogue, and cornerstone of a multicultural dialogical approach as it recognizes the identity-richness of the dialogue partners and the context in which they are working. Crucially, understanding and accounting for these prejudices has the goal of opening us up rather than closing us off to understanding. That is, whether prejudices have a positive or negative value relates to how they open us up or restrict our ability for dialogical understanding. This is of crucial importance for recognition of religious epistemologies. In this way "the solution [of dialogue] is *genuinely* open" and constructive of relations (Modood, 2017a: 86, emphasis added)—this is its dialogical character.

This chapter has made the case that multiculturalism provides a valuable framework, not least because of its central tenets of recognition and difference and its orientation toward positively valuing religious and cultural identities. Furthermore, we saw that alternative approaches to multiculturalism on these issues cannot offer resources to help us think about religious identity and its implications, reinforcing multiculturalism's relevance. Nevertheless, in relation to British Muslims this remains bound by an ethnic and cultural lens which therefore sidelines a specifically religious character. It is this that converts to Islam serve to problematise. Conceptualisations of identity, including those in the conversion literature, restrict the religious character of identity, which has implications for how we might substantively think about recognition and difference. This forms a core intervention of this thesis. Having established this groundwork, the following chapter takes up the conversion literature in more detail and moves towards a shift in conceiving religious identity that will inform the later discussions of the empirical material.

Chapter 3: Accounting for conversion in context

In the previous chapter I discussed the overlap in conceptions of identity between the two literatures of multiculturalism and conversion to Islam. I also began to emphasise multiculturalism's central concepts of difference and recognition, and in relation to these, highlighting the particular case of religious identity. In this chapter I assess more fully the literature on religious conversion more broadly, and conversion to Islam more specifically, in relation to religious identity, with particular reference to continuity and change. This develops the approach to the religious taken in this thesis, and as it relates to multiculturalism, and in turn further elaborates my approach to working across these two bodies of literature. To do this, it draws out pertinent sociological and theological reflections. By so doing, it charts a path to an alternative approach to religious identity from that of discrete 'mosaic-like' categories or an ethnic lens that in turn suggests different questions and directions of enquiry. It concludes by outlining Simmel's notions of *religiosity* and *religion* that will orient the later discussions.

Sociological reflections

Ever since Lofland and Stark's (1965) paper *Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective*, the most influential 'wave' in conversion studies has been process models, replacing earlier brainwashing approaches. It has in fact been noted that the subsequent two decades of research on religious conversion following its publication feel like a footnote to this paper (Yang and Abel, 2015). These studies aim to explain pre-conversion psychological and sociological factors that combine to bring about and constitute conversion. More recent models, whether they are called stages (Rambo, 1993), careers (Gooren, 2015), or steps (Iyadurai, 2015) are all heavily indebted to this way of thinking about conversion.

In contrast to this decades-old body of literature, while there are both older and more recent historical studies of conversion to Islam (Bulliet, 1979; Geaves, 2010; Gilham, 2014; Levtsion, 1979; Matar, 1998), the academic literature on contemporary conversions to Islam is an emerging field, predominantly from the last 10 years. This picture is broadly similar across other European countries. In this more recent literature on conversion to Islam we can observe a shift in emphasis from process models.

While moves have been made away from earlier conversion studies, two models from this literature have been found by some scholars to be sufficiently broad to be relevant for understanding conversion to Islam. These are Lewis Rambo's process stage model and Lofland and Skonovd's motifs. Lewis Rambo (1993), weaving together decades of conversion

scholarship to encompass the full “spectrum of possibilities” (Rambo, 1999: 170), suggests a process stage model to understand religious conversion. He outlines seven interactive and cumulative stages that can be identified as the conversion process: context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences. In contrast to process models dominant at the time, Lofland and Skonovd (1981) proposed six motifs of conversion. These were concerned with identifying a way of categorising the main tropes of the reason(s) for conversion, including what made different conversions distinctive, and capturing some core of what could define them along these lines. The six motifs they identified were: intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist and coercive.

Conversion as process

In relation to the applicability of Rambo’s process stage model, Köse (1996) (at the time the only monograph on British converts to Islam) found that relations with Muslims, experiment, encounter and interaction played an instrumental role in conversion. Al-Qwidi (2002) finds Rambo’s model largely appropriate but modifies it by combining the interaction and commitment stages, also suggesting that the Qur’an could form the ‘advocate’ in the encounter rather than this being another person. Vroon (2014) questions the underlying linearity in the stages, suggesting that they may not all be passed through, not be passed through in that order, or be overlapping rather than sequential. It is important to note that Rambo did suggest this himself. One of the more significant challenges has been to the centrality of the crisis stage (Al-Qwidi, 2002; Vroon, 2014; Roald, 2004; Poston, 1992; cf Wohlrab-Sahr, 2006). Roald argues that in the context of Islam as a widely denigrated minority faith we may better speak of a ‘crisis’ stage following conversion as a result of subsequent social pressure (Roald, 2004). The crisis here then is not a personal and psychological one emerging from one’s biography and which precipitates a religious conversion, but rather a social one as a consequence of converting to a minority faith.

Roald’s argument in relation to crisis also marks a move to greater concern and emphasis of post-conversion experience and pull factors of Islam, rather than the push factors of personal and social background. Roald (2004) offers the most comprehensive treatment and modification of Rambo, although Roald’s stages are stages after conversion and therefore not a model of conversion in the same way as Rambo’s. Her more recently modified model (2012) includes four stages: *zealotry*, also known by the moniker ‘convertitis’ (Murad, 1997); *disappointment*, being a disjoint between the reality and ideals encountered upon entering the faith; *acceptance*, when converts are able to “come back to themselves” (Roald, 2004: 281); and *secularization*, when the convert sees religion as “wholly private” (Roald, 2012: 356), representing the dominant secular ideal of division between public (politics) and private

(religion). Roald seems to see this stage as the converts returning to their original cultural background. Similar to Rambo, nevertheless, Roald notes that not all the stages are passed through by all converts, or in the same order, although this order might be considered something like an 'ideal type'. There is a problem, however, with their very conception as stages. The definition of a stage as "a phase or period in a sequence of interactions" (Rambo and Bauman, 2012: 881), and the definition of the concept called a stage are here at odds. Furthermore, Roald's stages, as Rambo's, have also been criticized for offering a model that does not reflect the variation in conversion experiences and the tacit suggestion that a person may be 'stuck' at an early stage is not helpful for understanding different people's ways of interpreting and practising Islam (Vroon, 2014). Followingly, this conception can see converts in something of a limbo of in-betweenness.

It has been argued that the variance in experience produces a serious difficulty in assuming any typicality that these models attempt to distill (van Nieuwkerk, 2006a). The variance is a result of historical and contextual differences and changes, and historical and contextual differences and changes in relations. Dutton, lamenting attempts by scholars to "rationalize even what cannot be rationalized" takes this further, suggesting that "it is, ultimately, impossible to explain why people become Muslims and, more especially, why they should remain so" (Dutton, 1999: 164). Attempts to do this have the unfortunate, and often unintended, effect of conforming to rather than challenging dominant conceptual norms, as is evident in Roald's 'secularization' of convert identities.

In process models, the religious aspect of conversions has consistently been 'bracketed', often not given much more attention than that akin to footnotes. Gooren (2012), for example, gives it no more than a page's worth of attention in the conclusion, into which a number of religious traditions are squeezed, and omits it from the tabulated representation of his model. Iyadurai (2011, 2014, 2015) has attempted to redress this by bringing into his 'step' model what he calls the 'spark'. Yet, as with the problem of stages more generally, it remains conceived as a discrete motivational force as part of the process.

Notwithstanding the insights into the place, role and importance of the religious in people's lives and in society, there are important epistemological consequences as a result of these tendencies in the literature on conversion, and that to Islam. Notably, working within dominant secularism paradigms, the reduction and discrete categorisation of the religious aspect is evident in how social identities are thought of. Consequently, religious identity is peripheral in these frameworks for understanding religious conversion and identity.

Conversion as type

Overall, however, scholars of conversion to Islam have been less concerned with theories about who is or is not a convert, or what does or does not constitute religious conversion, as opposed to, for example, alternation (see Travisano, 1981). They are more concerned with conveying the experiences of converts to Islam and their self-understanding of conversion, bringing to the centre the voices and experiences of subjects to challenge some of the stereotypes on which social exclusions are based. In the language of motifs (Lofland & Skonovd, 1981), the intellectual is highlighted as conversion is described as the mature, considered choice of an active subject (Zebiri, 2008; Roald, 2004; Guimond, 2017). This individual choice is understood in the broader social context of increased individualization and pluralization (Roald, 2004; van Nieuwkerk, 2006a; Michel, 2009). There is an emphasis on the cognitive, marked by converts' reading and discussing issues throughout the conversion process (Zebiri, 2008). The rationality, reasonableness or common-sense and logic of Islam are emphasized (Al-Qwidi, 2002; Zebiri, 2008; Roald, 2004; van Nieuwkerk, 2014; Poston, 1992). Islam's theological simplicity in comparison to Christianity, and particularly the doctrine of the Trinity in contrast to *tawhīd*, is commonly talked about, for instance (Jawad, 2006; also, Sultán, 1999; Poston, 1992).

This emphasis on the intellectual is important in relation to how Islam itself is understood, and is also to be welcomed in challenging views of religious belief as somehow anachronistic to modernity. Nevertheless, there is a significant consequence of this emphasis which parallels that from the section above. By effectively side-lining the religious aspect of conversion, its ability to offer a sustained form of social critique through the lens of British converts to Islam is constrained. It is this relation between theological principles and sociologically grounded enquiry that this thesis argues can offer a fruitful perspective and unsettling of boundaries.

This raises the prospect of being careful not to over-emphasize the cognitive motif to the point at which an emphasis on the 'mystical' is too restricted or denied. Such an alternative position would, for example, allow the inclusion of the importance in becoming Muslim "by a recognition of the heart", the heart being, in Qur'anic terminology, the seat of the intellect ('*aql*') (Dutton, 1999: 163; see also Kocabaş, 1987). Ahmad in fact argues that '*aql*' "dwells with rather than banishes the cognate Islamic notion of *qalb* (heart)" (Ahmad I, 2017: 30). Such heartfelt recognition was a consistent theme in my participants' narratives and marked the ineffable aspect of their conversion.

Furthermore, the aspects of choice and individualization cannot be simply stated. While this may be an important aspect of the social and cultural context which helps provide the

conditions of conversion and to an extent shapes how conversion is understood, converts themselves are often critical of modern society and this in fact forms part of the attraction of Islam (Soutar, 2010). Society is seen by many converts as unable to provide the basis for strong religious identification. Christianity, for example, is viewed as largely reduced to social convention.

There is a strong line of critique of wider 'western' society and social and lifestyle norms. It is often criticized for being over-individualistic, materialistic and over-sexualized, especially of the female body, as well as being spiritually empty (Zebiri, 2008; Al-Qwidi, 2002). This is especially so in relation to gender norms. In relation to majority society, Muslim women can experience a loss of their identity as an independent and intelligent woman, especially if they adopt the headscarf. They can feel underestimated (Roald, 2004) by being seen through stereotypes perceiving Islam and Muslim men to be oppressive to women and confining them to domesticity, voicelessness and powerlessness. By contrast, many female converts in fact identify with the concepts of family, womanhood and motherhood they find in Islamic precepts, and stress a mode of equity rather than equality that allows them to be freer in these choices. From this position some seek to develop an alternative feminism (Roald, 2006; Zebiri, 2008) and femininity which is "defined by modesty, respect, and integrity without compromising [their] independence and professional career" (McGinty, 2007: 478-479; 2006; Piela, 2015). This alternative feminism challenges a dominant western feminist trend of secularism and attitudes to the meaning of covering or uncovering the female body and being "the object of the gaze" (Franks, 2000: 920). At the same time, it challenges some traditional readings and practices within Islam along gender lines (Badran, 2006; McGinty, 2006, 2007).

This body of literature on conversion offers sociological perspectives on this phenomenon, situating it in the context of modern Britain and allowing the experiences of converts to come through. On the one hand, it is important to recognize that "piety is not a matter of fact or end result of practicing and being committed but a learned practice or training that needs to be regenerated daily" (van Nieuwkerk, 2014: 681). Emphasising practice against belief, Moosavi (2012), for instance, suggests that converts develop their sense of piety and relation to Islam through 'performing' authenticity, that is, mimicking and conforming to particular practices of a particular Muslim community.

'Belief' or piety, however, needn't be seen merely through either deviance from or conformity to the dominant norm. It is this in turn which results in a displacement and out-of-place-ment of converts to Islam in terms of identity, specifically religious identity. Iyadurai, for example, notes the common feelings of disenchantment with the religion of birth of his participants. One remarked, for instance, "I fulfilled all rituals so that I could be happy but the end was vain... but I couldn't find permanent satisfaction in any; everything was mechanical" (2011: 508).

Importantly, embodied practice is *relationally* constitutive of moral subjectivity and central to ongoing development of this subjectivity (Winchester, 2008, emphasis added). It is thus, for example, that we can understand Winter when he decries the fact that veiling has been increasingly seen in purely sociological terms of identity affirmation rather than theological terms (Winter, 2003; also Piela, 2015). I argue that rather than thinking within frameworks and epistemologies that serve to contain the religious aspect of identity, we should think at the limits of these boundaries of comprehension. It is working at the boundaries that allows them to be unsettled.

Important here also are conceptions of agency as they relate to piety and the pious construction of the self, as such conceptions of agency have “opened up or closed very different possibilities for acting and being” (Asad, 1996: 73). Alternative approaches to agency (Mahmood, 2005; Avishai, 2008), building on a notion of agency as docility, note that what may from the outside appear as female docility or compliance can be reread through a conception of agency as observance and of women as actively performing and developing a religious subjecthood in relation (possibly oppositional) to secular society. Approaches that would ‘bracket off’ the religious miss fundamental aspects of identity and its relation to practice that are both personal and have social implications. In this way, process models and frameworks in which conversion is ‘explained’ unfortunately do little to address exclusion and discrimination beyond pointing out its existence.

Existing conceptions for exploring conversion and identity, through ethnic or cultural lenses, seeing the religious as a discrete, one-of-many side-by-side category, or as simply strategic practice, perhaps with the aim of belonging to an identified social group, reflect a particular view of subjectivity. This, I suggest, unnecessarily mischaracterises converts’ identities, particularly regarding the place of religiosity. It is thus that an alternative approach to these identities is necessary and offers a fruitful critical perspective on religious identity and belonging. This is where the relevance of multiculturalism arises, and the language of recognition and difference offers a rewarding orientation. This is not because multiculturalism does already serve these purposes better - the critical perspective taken here extends to multiculturalism. As discussed previously, the dominant categories of ethno-cultural and ethno-religious are problematic in this sense. In order to make this shift, the approach to the religious must also be resituated. This is taken up in more detail in the following sections. To begin this task, it is first necessary to reflect on theological aspects of conversion with a view towards bringing them into conversation with the sociological. These theological aspects continue to alert us to some of the problems with conceiving identity that have been developed so far. This then leads to the final section of this chapter in which the approach to religious identity adopted as a result is elaborated.

Theological reflections

Reflecting on almost two decades of research following Lofland and Stark's seminal paper (1965) Snow & Machalak commented that: "The one theme pervading the literature on conversion is that the experience involves radical personal change" (1984: 169). While change has been central and defining for some studies on British converts to Islam (Köse 1996; Al Qwidi 2002; Neumueller 2012), elsewhere this emphasis has begun to shift toward its obverse of continuity. McGinty, for example, comments that "conversion is defined and understood not only through the changes following from becoming Muslim, but also through continuity, reconfirmation of preexisting values, and an all-embracing feeling of connecting earlier understandings with new ones" (2006: 67; also Alyedreessy, 2016). This aspect leads towards the religious and the theological aspects of conversion and, in turn, suggests an epistemological implication: that we bring a 'theological ear' (Keenan 2003: 20) to sociological endeavours. This 'ear' is a way of orienting sociological understanding and listening in a way that does not avoid or reduce elements of religiosity that are so central to participants' subjectivity. It, therefore, is aimed at enriching sociological accounts. It acknowledges, for example, that "theology underlies action-driving values... as theological interpretations both motivate and constrain social action" (Becker, 2017). What emerges as salient and prominent in regard to this in the first instance is the dynamic between continuity and change.

The importance of the notion of change for conversion can be seen in the Latin *convertere*, meaning 'to turn' or 'to head in a different direction' (Roald, 2004: 13). In Christianity 'turning' suggests a reorientation to meaning of life (Gillespie, 1991). Arabic, in contrast, has no direct equivalent for the English word 'conversion' or 'to convert', which may be seen to call into question the ability of the term 'conversion' to capture experience (Hermansen, 1999, 2014). It has been argued that 'conversion' is in fact an "outsider's perspective" (Roald, 2004: 14, 86-87). This is because underlying concepts commonly found to refer to converts in Islam relate not to change but to continuity. The term 'revert' instead of convert, is used more commonly by born Muslims and many converts (reverts) themselves (Hermansen, 1999). The term 'revert' reflects the idea that all souls are Muslim, having recognized God in pre-eternity, in turn found in the concept of *fitrah*. Although it has no exact English equivalent, *fitrah* captures the idea of 'natural disposition' and is inherently ontological. This indicates an important theological distinction from 'conversion' that also requires us to hear non-secular time. Underlying it is not change but continuity, at least in an other-worldly sense. A revert is not as such changing from one religion to another but accepting and returning to an original and innate state of being a Muslim having been brought up in a non-Muslim context by a non-Muslim family. This is something we have already touched upon in the introduction in reference to Lord Stanley and

Lady Evelyn Cobbold. This is important as it highlights the primacy of religion and an Islamic identity and cautions against over-emphasising multiple or plural identities and losing this sense of subjective ontology. This itself has implications for thinking about multiplicity as multiple epistemologies.

Moreover, in Islam there is no formal rite of conversion equivalent to baptism or formal entry into orthodox Judaism. To become Muslim is comparatively simple and involves sincerely reciting the *shahada*, the declaration of faith that there is no God but God and Muhammad is His Prophet, in front of at least two witnesses. In fact, neither classical nor modern Islamic literature has offered theories or extended analysis and discussion of conversion in Islam (Al-Qwidi, 2002; Poston, 1992). Scholars point instead to terms that are used in reference to people becoming Muslim. A central term is *aslama*. As a verbal form it literally means 'to submit' and is from where the nominal forms Muslim and Islam (in its capitalized or non-capitalized forms) derive (Dutton, 1999; Woodberry, 1992; Hermansen, 2014; Roald, 2004; Jawad, 2006; Shaban, 1979; Al-Qwidi, 2002). Here, *islam*, and 'Islam', are verbal nouns which are themselves the act of *aslama*. Importantly, and echoing the above, the emphasis is on becoming and being Muslim "through submission, of the heart *and* the limbs" (Dutton, 1999: 152, emphasis added) to God.

It is important to note that the findings in the conversion literature for whether 'converts' prefer the term convert, revert, New Muslim, embrace Islam, or become Muslim vary. For example, Roald (2004) finds a preference for New Muslim (also Abdel Haleem, 2003) and van Nieuwkerk (2006b) for 'becoming Muslim' or 'embracing Islam'. In this study, while revert was the most common term used by participants, this was not uniform. Some used the term convert, with one person friendlily remarking "or revert as you have it" after I had introduced the project using the term 'revert'. Some used a mix with no apparently strong preference, and at one mosque I was advised by my initial contact to only use 'New Muslim' when talking to mosque leaders lest this invite a lengthy semantic lecture⁷. This variation is itself important as it relates to participants' conceptions of conversion and subjectivity. Our 'theological ear' must remain sociologically grounded and not preclude variety. This again highlights the relevance of a conversation between sociological and theological aspects rather than one against or over the other. It also again points to the dynamics between continuity and change as the important site of the work of problematization when it comes to identity.

We are left then needing a different way of approaching the study of religious identities of converts to Islam. Multiculturalism gives us the important resources of recognition and

⁷ For ease and general understanding I use 'convert' throughout except when in specific reference to a participant who used different terminology to preserve this distinction.

difference but does not get us far enough towards what we are recognizing and what the foundation of difference is here. Interculturalism and everyday multiculturalism lose these two aspects themselves. The literature on conversion to Islam suffers from a reductive and secularizing approach to converts' identities, albeit a sympathetic one. A theoretical shift is needed that enables us to explore the tension between the religious and the sociological. This shift will be made in stages. The first is outlined below and pertains most immediately to the tension highlighted here - the need to hear the religious. The second is made in the following chapter when the discussion turns to belonging. The third is then discussed in the methodology chapter which follows.

Specifically, I want to argue for a religious identity as offering a problematic to the terms on which social identities are usually delineated. While it may be the "reflection or shadow" rather than the "essence of religion" that we can study (Brown, 2006: 9), this can orient us away from trying to explain conversion, and instead attend to its social and cultural significance, the religious aspect of which is central. To begin to make this theoretical shift I suggest we can usefully turn to Georg Simmel's notions of *religiosity* and *religion*.

Simmel: *religion* and *religiosity*

Simmel's writings on religion have generally occupied a marginalised position in sociological studies of religion. In fact, one commentator has noted that while his broader oeuvre may have been enjoying something of a renaissance, his writings on religion remain "something of an embarrassment" to the sociology of religion (McCole 2005: 9; also Laermans 2006; Varga, 2007). Nevertheless, even though Simmel did not write about conversion nor Islam, and may therefore seem an unlikely source, his writings offer significant insights for thinking about religion that bear on continuity and change, which will form the focus of chapter 6. This is perhaps not least because he developed a sociology of religiosity (Laermans, 2006).

Simmel recognised *religiosity*⁸ as "a 'being' not a 'having'" (Simmel, 1997a [1918]: 22). This stands in contrast to *religion*, the cultural forms, such as certain texts, institutional structures and practices, necessary to 'being in the world' empirically. Religious belief is not merely something one possesses and performs at certain times or in certain places. *Religiosity* "in its pure essence, free of all empirical material, is a life" (ibid: 143). In a profound sense social reality, in its physical, material existence is a form which shapes the contents of life (Simmel, 1997a [1912 (1906)]: 140), life being here *religio*. However, these are distinct. For Simmel, it is *religiosity* which is at the heart of the processual dynamics that actuates religion rather than the other way round (for example, ibid: 211). He suggests that "religion sets the fundamental tone for

⁸ To denote this specific use of these terms, I italicize them throughout.

life [through which] life's single elements... interrelate harmoniously with each other and with the whole" (Simmel, 1997a [1912(1906)]: 137). For Simmel, *religiosity* 'sets the fundamental tone' in a way which is not necessarily conflictual with other aspects of identity, such as national or ethnic identity. What is meant by *religiosity* here then, is not an attempt to establish a unitary understanding of that term that all will accept. Rather it is used to refer to and capture that unifying and overarching *being* and connection to the Divine that orients and activates much of worldly experience for those whose stories I heard. *Religiosity* refers to and registers an ineffable, irreducible *being*, whereas *religion*, in its italicised form, refers to and registers forms such as mosques, textual interpretations and religious organisations.

This represents a qualitative epistemological shift in understanding that allows a transcendence of fragmented identities and contradiction to come into view (Flanagan, 2008). Following this, we can also hold the inarticulable element of *religiosity* together with the articulable *religion*, including, significantly, the dissonance, process and dynamics between the two. This allows *religiosity* to be foregrounded rather than backgrounded in a way in which unity is not therefore dissolved as a result of investigating and revealing multiplicity.

Simmel's distinction between *religiosity* and *religion* also allows us to address the other central problematic, along with continuity and change, that between culture and religion and their discursive separation in convert narratives. We can note immediately in reference to this how *religiosity* registers the 'religion' side of this dynamic, while *religion*, as the worldly, empirical forms of religion, registers the 'culture' side; that is, the cultural forms of born Muslim communities as well as those of converts. This offers an analytical approach that does not reduce *religiosity* to cultural forms, with *religion* registering This allows a view of the effects of designating something religious rather than defining what this means.

It is important to note at this juncture how the word 'culture' is being used in this thesis. As with what is termed 'religious', what is termed 'cultural' is not pre-determined or pre-defined, but rather refers to that which is narrated as being 'religious' or 'cultural' by participants, or as being imbued with alternatively 'religious' or 'cultural' qualities. There is thus individual variation in what is designated as one or the other between participants. This in itself is not a problem as the thesis is concerned with the fact of this distinction and the dynamics this gives rise to rather than the exact designations themselves. This becomes especially pertinent when thinking about patterns and dynamics of belonging stemming from conversion. As well as the parallel *religiosity*-religion and religion-culture dynamics, a third important way in which 'culture' appears in the thesis is with reference to Olivier Roy's (2010) 'deculturation' of Islam. Again, there is a similarity here in that the discourse of deculturation is one in which the religious 'spirit' of Islam is discursively cleaved from particular cultural forms.

The next chapter turns to consider the issue of how belonging is construed and conceptualised in the literature, before outlining the analytical approach taken to this in later chapters. To begin with, however, it sets out the place and context of the religious more broadly in the context of modern Britain.

Chapter 4: Binds and boundaries of belonging

Franks (2000) has suggested that the idea of a British Muslim convert can be hard to locate in relation to majority and minorities in society, and it is to this issue of social position and belonging that this chapter turns. Identity is of course intimately tied to belonging and their separation here is for analytical purposes rather than representative of actually discrete categories, and these will be brought back together later on.

It is a core premise of this thesis that a multi-level analysis that seeks to connect processes of the personal with the social, the micro with the macro, is necessary. Being concerned with the centrality of *religiosity* and the sociological implications of this, it is necessary to consider the wider picture of religion in society as significant to the concerns presented here. This is particularly salient with regard to the culture-religion divide and, therefore, how converts are both positioned and position themselves alongside their identity negotiations. This chapter begins by setting the broader context in and of which converts are embracing Islam and emphasising *religiosity* as part of this divide. It then considers how the place of converts to Islam in society is generally conceived in the literature and offers a critical reading of this and what it means for British converts to Islam. It concludes by discussing the analytical approach that this thesis adopts in order to discuss the issue of British converts to Islam and belonging. Again, Simmel is employed, this time through his essay *The Stranger*.

The religious and the secular

Following Davie's challenge from the introduction that we rethink assumptions regarding how religious issues are fully accommodated in analysis, my aim in this section is an attempt to open up the parameters of debate for this and future research and thought on social identities by suggesting an alternative horizon – meant in the Gadamerian sense of the word (see chapter 2) – that is intended to prove productive for the kind of recognition central to multiculturalism. As such I bring theological principles to bear on a sociological account. This move allows a perspective to develop which can go some way to unsettling some of the boundaries already alluded to.

The place of religion in secular societies of course differs. In Britain there are two general considerations: the pluralisation of religious belief in society as a result of the emergence of minority faiths that have increasingly found a home in Britain, intensifying particularly following patterns of immigration since WWII, and the changing connection between the state and the Established Church. That is, a pluralisation of religious faiths has emerged at the same time as the presence of religion in both people's day to day lives and its institutional power

has been declining. This marks not just an overall trend to greater plurality, but also to greater secularity. The dynamics of this are complex and debated (for just a few of the most high-profile texts on Britain see, Bruce, 2002; Woodhead and Catto, 2012; Heelas and Woodhead, 2005; Voas and Bruce, 2007; Davie, 2015). My concern here is to chart what these changing relations mean when it comes to thinking about the space for religious subjectivities and epistemologies.

We can develop this by usefully considering the influential work of Talal Asad, who deconstructs the presumptions of what will be referred to here as 'radical secularism'. Asad, in his *Formations of the Secular* (2003) draws a distinction between the epistemic category of the secular and the political doctrine of secularism. From this he does two important things for my concerns. Firstly, he argues that secularism is a form of statecraft, which as such legitimates certain ideas, practices and ways of being above others (also Mehta, 2008). In this case, religious practice and belief come to be seen as anomalous, even anachronistic, and are as a result "confined to a space where they cannot threaten political stability or the liberties of 'free thinking' citizens" (Asad, 2003: 191). Secularism is thus "not a simple matter of the absence of 'religion' in the public life of the modern nation-state" (Asad, 2003: 5). John Milbank, in a forceful rebuke to political philosophy and political theory, has argued that this kind of secularisation of political ontology has (erroneously and unnecessarily) 'sundered' human life from human reason, and human nature from human society, culture, and supernatural grace (Milbank, 2013: 5). The implication is of course that there are other ways of being socially and politically that do not follow this type of 'radical secular' logic of separation and opposition.

Secondly, and following on from this, Asad shows how the binary of secular and religious proceeds from the teleological assumptions of the myth of progress found in ideologies of secularism-thought, as distinct from secular-thought. He does this by tracing the genealogies of secularism and secular, and religious history (see also Asad 1996), demonstrating how these terms, ideas and their relationship have changed (see also McGuire, 2008; Medovai, 2012; Masuzawa, 2005; Cavanaugh, 2009). While "the concept of 'the secular' today is part of a doctrine called secularism" (Asad, 2003: 191), this is not so in any essential sense and 'secular' is conceptually prior to secularism. Asad argues that "'the secular' should not be thought of as the space in which real human life gradually emancipates itself from the controlling power of 'religion' and achieves the latter's relocation. It is this assumption that allows us to think of religion as 'infecting' the secular domain" (2003: 191).

Other authors have addressed the view of critique that has followed secularism-thought, where critique is seen as something particular to secularism-thought and largely absent in religious reasoning and modes of thought and knowledge production. Saba Mahmood (2009) has

addressed the bases on which religion and religious critique is excluded from the secular public sphere and on which the relationship between the material and spiritual has come to be predominantly understood. In Mahmood's reading, a secular mode of thought is underpinned by a semiology in which the signifier and signified are detached, with the effect of denigrating a particular religious ontology. On this basis it is excluded from being considered legitimate critique and a legitimate way of being in public and political terms. Salomon and Walton (2012) and Ahmad (Ahmad I, 2017) have also argued that what is often generally taken to be critical reading and engagement is actually a particular, and parochial, understanding of what is 'critical'. They are specifically concerned with the example of Islam and the charges often laid against it in this regard. They show that religious modes of engagement are not uncritical or 'pretheoretical' but rather represent a plurality of critique and critical positions, and that "perspectives that are both pious and critical exist comfortably within the scope of Islam" (Salomon and Walton, 2012: 419), undermining claims that pious and 'critical' are counter positions.

This type of analysis can also be seen in the arguments of leading thinkers in the sociology of religion. Casanova has noted how a secularization paradigm shared throughout Europe has the 'quasi-normative' consequence of the decline of religion being seen as teleologically 'normal' and 'progressive' (2006: 66). Linda Woodhead has similarly argued that "very often secularization theory is not merely describing the decline of religion, but endorsing belief in an evolutionary progress from pre-modern superstition to modern enlightenment. As such, the secular is not merely the subtraction of religion... but a counter-ideology which needs to be defended and institutionalized just as religion does" (2012: 4). Yet, as she has elsewhere noted, the characterizations of and distinctions between the secular and religious that such attitudes rest on are questionable, not least because religions are far more diverse than these positions suggest (Woodhead, 2008).

As a result of these overall trends, "taking faith seriously is becoming, increasingly, the exception rather than the norm" (Davie, 2015: 63). Furthermore, religion and religious issues are usually framed as "a problem" in political as well as academic frames (ibid: 228; also, 2012). Likewise, theology is most often "mentioned in a pejorative sense" and set in an oppositional binary to everyday or lived religion (Helmer 2012: 230). This last point registers a disconnect between macro and micro level approaches within the sociology of religion itself. On the one hand, an approach that focuses on 'official religions' and institutionally prescribed beliefs and practices, misses how people actually understand and practice religious lives, that is, how religion is 'lived' (McGuire, 2008). On the other hand, an overly-individualistic approach that does not connect to these forms of religion neglects much that is sociologically relevant of the social context in which people negotiate their religious lives. This is where the

relation between *religion* and *religiosity* can be a fruitful engagement into these issues as it holds a conversation between social forms and meaningful personal experience.

As Davie notes, a result of an understanding of the secular and religious based on opposition is a context which lacks the vocabulary to have serious conversations about religion at the same time as these questions are increasingly important for parts of the population, resulting in an “ill-mannered and ill-informed” debate about religion in society (2012: 283). This is not least because media portrayals of religion, which are over-whelmingly negative, are continually relied upon in a context characterised by religious illiteracy (ibid).

It is here that we can now directly link this back to multiculturalism. ‘Radical secularism’ is oppositional and argues for absolute separation between religion and state, and public and private. ‘Moderate secularism’, by contrast, takes a more pragmatic and relative view of separation. It is this latter that Modood (2009a; 2010) advocates and argues is the form that characterises the British context. Relevant here, however, is that religion-as-problem has been more specifically related to the presence of Muslims and Islam (Davie, 2012; Casanova, 2006, 2011). This suggests that there is a slight tension between moderate and radical secularism positions as otherwise moderately secular attitudes may become more radically secular when being related to Muslims and Islam (also Salomon and Walton, 2012).

The status of secularism’s relation to Islam is also highly contested within Islam with some holding Islam’s compatibility, some its alien-ness, some its exceptionalism, or need for reform along secular lines (Gallab, 2018). Jackson challenges many presumptions in relation to Islam and secularity, arguing for the notion of ‘the Islamic secular’, in which Islam can accommodate the secular without thereby being consumed by secularism. Central to this relationship is not that between religion and the state, but between public order and Sharia (Krämer, 2013). Jackson argues that the Islamic secular, which exists beyond the bounded limits of Sharia, lies in “the unbounded purview of Islam as religion, that is to say, life lived under the conscious presumption of an adjudicative divine gaze” (Jackson, 2017: 2). Jackson’s differentiation presents the jurisdictional reach of the Sharia as the religious and what lies beyond that the secular, arguing therefore that an ‘Islamic secular’ emerges from within Islam, not as the imposition of an outside force (Jackson, 2017).

The relationship of religious and secular will be returned to in chapter 8. If this outlines the background of what Charles Taylor has called the ‘social imaginary’ (2004) to how the religious is conceived in modern society, we can now turn more specifically to how converts to Islam come to be positioned in the conversion literature within this broader picture.

A conceptual wilderness: stuck in the middle (with who?)

It is perhaps needless to say that converting to a minority religion, and one that has been routinely discriminated against and subjected to close attention, is a difficult path to tread and has social consequences which can be felt acutely. Converts' position in relation to other individuals and groups in society can change, often significantly, and often in ways they find extremely difficult.

Relations with family and friends can often become strained. Ramahi and Suleiman characterise this by suggesting that converts become 'intimate strangers'. This term they use to register the "benign neglect" and "lack of interest" they encounter from their friends and family (2017: 21-22), and which stands in contrast to the bewilderment, suspicion and hostility that many experience, which is discussed further in chapter 7.

In relation to majority society converts are seen in racial or ethnic rather than religious terms. Moosavi (2015a) shows how they are 're-racialized' as 'other' by the dominant cultural group and seen as strangers in a country and by people who were previously familiars (also Özyürek, 2015; Franks, 2000; Gallonier, 2015; Piela, 2015). While my own findings concur with these processes in many ways, I conceptualise this as re-ethnicisation rather re-racialization to capture the cultural logic of these patterns of discrimination and Islamophobia (Hall, 2000; Modood, 1997/2015; Hargreaves 1995/2003). That is, they have been displaced and decentred as no longer of Britain as their re-ethnicization acts as the process through which they are distinguished as culturally, and religiously, 'other'. While converts can on the one hand be seen to represent the irrepressible emergence of Islam as very much a 'part of the scene' in a new way, their re-ethnicization refuses this and continues to mark it as 'an alien wedge' in a socio-cultural and political context in which Islam is positioned as foreign and viewed with suspicion.

There is here an important overlap with more general dominant discourses around Islam and Muslims, especially those in the mainstream media, often premised on a claim of incommensurable cultural and religious differences. These serve to contain and represent them in narrow frameworks in which Muslims and Islam are negativised in relation to the dominant culture. As such, Muslims come to be shrouded in cultural stigmatization, presented as pre-modern, particularly regarding attitudes to women (Poole, 2002; Richardson, 2004; Moore et al., 2008; Baker et al., 2013) and are not represented in 'normal' stories (Knott et al., 2013). These discourses, moreover, regularly portray converts as a more specific security risk than born Muslims (Brice, 2010; Moosavi, 2013; Sealy, 2017), itself indicative of the trope of 'betrayal' often applied to converts.

Alternatively, converts may be perceived as an anomalous phenomenon in need of explanation, as was discussed in the introduction, the explicit or implicit question being one of consternation: 'Why would anyone do that?'. For white converts their whiteness and with it their Britishness, is displaced in favour of an ethno-cultural and ethno-religious view of them as Muslim. Converts of colour, already perceived as 'other', go unnoticed as converts by this part of society, which again highlights the conflation between the ethnic and the religious as Islam is ethnicized.

Moreover, while converts are seen as 'other' from the idea of a national imaginary, they also often continue to be seen as 'other' with respect to Islam from the perspective of born Muslims (Brice, 2010; Zebiri, 2008; Suleiman, 2013, 2015; Moosavi, 2015b). Relations to born-Muslim communities can also be a source of struggle for belonging. At times converts may experience a warm welcome and be seen as a vindication of the place and significance of Islam in Britain, whereas at other times they can experience outright suspicion and rejection (Roald, 2004; Zebiri, 2008) or be viewed as 'religious imposters' (Rogozen-Soltar, 2012). This might lead to pressure to conform to certain practices and exclusion without such conformity. This can lead to converts feeling isolated and dismayed, especially given a lack of support when they are also experiencing a difficult time in relation to other friends and family following their conversion (Zebiri, 2008; Ramahi & Suleiman, 2017). The sense of being positioned as a stranger, in its negative sense, and having their voices "filtered out" (Suleiman, 2013: 19) is something that converts can experience not only from the dominant cultural group they are perceived to have 'left', but also from the British-Muslim communities with which multiculturalism has been centrally concerned and they are supposedly seeking to 'join'.

The dominant conceptualisations of the position of British converts in society found in the conversion literature rest on a conceptual in-betweenness. Moosavi (2012) has focussed on how converts develop a Muslim habitus in response to such positioning. He argues that in order to gain acceptance and belonging from Muslim communities, and be recognized as 'authentic' Muslims, converts 'perform' authenticity through conforming to 'authentic' practice. These 'performances' are tactical moves through which the convert seeks to belong to a particular community, assessing themselves against the benchmark of born Muslims. In a related vein, Köse suggests that as a result converts become stuck in a process where "resocialization may never be completed" (1996: 140). These are problematic, however, as they rest on seeing converts somewhat stuck in the middle between two discrete camps where converts' belonging is judged against to what extent they can assimilate into a particular Muslim community, despite the great variance and diversity in and between such 'communities'. In a slightly different vein, Zebiri claims they can be seen as a counter-culture given their critique of certain

societal norms and “chosen marginality” (Zebiri, 2008: 193; also Vroon, 2014; Mossiere, 2016; Roald, 2004).

This conceptual in-betweenness also emerges in other common concepts such as the mediator, the bridge, and the liminal (Roald, 2004; van Nieuwkerk, 2004; Zebiri, 2008; Geaves, 2010; Soutar, 2010; Jawad, 2012; Suleiman, 2013, 2015; Moosavi, 2013; Mossiere, 2016; also Allievi, 2002). Significantly, this in-betweenness is conceptually premised not on connection, even when that is what is perhaps intended, but on division. The concepts of the bridge and the liminal mark the two separate positions of Muslims and non-Muslims in Britain. Converts might be seen as a means to connect these two, as in the bridge. As one convert noted at a symposium, however, “the problem with being a bridge is that people tend to trample on you” (in Suleiman, 2013: 84). In the context of the above discussion of patterns of discrimination from both sides, it remains unclear on what ground this bridge is to have its foundations built. The convert remains stuck in the middle between two opposing camps, both of which may exclude. In the case of the liminal they in some way have a foot in either camp, perhaps transiting between them rather than being transited across, but the distinction is maintained all the same. In both cases converts are somewhat stuck in the middle.

Such conceptions, as with a form of tactical habitus, leave converts out-of-place. They may reflect how converts are positioned, or what *object* positions they are put into, but they tell us very little about how they position themselves, or what *subject* positions they carve out and open up. These conceptions subsequently do little to challenge this out-of-placeness and essentializing of identity positions. British converts to Islam can become all too easily *doubly estranged*, left wandering in something of a conceptual wilderness. This is not to suggest that these positions cannot be a form of positive subjectivity or could not be adopted as subject rather than object positions and a form of agency. Rather, the argument is that a careful analysis suggests that these positions cannot be readily assumed because of the ways in which converts are *made strange* as well as the ways in which they both make themselves strange and familiar. Moreover, it is this analysis that has the potential to unsettle the boundaries Viswanathan (1998) suggests studying conversion can provide. The dynamics between the religion-culture problematic, I suggest, provide a fruitful way of thinking about these conversions that can see British converts to Islam in-place. This thesis argues that a shift to an analytical lens that sees converts as *between* rather than in-between, premised on the alternative approach to religious identity outlined in the previous chapter, presents a different picture of converts social relations and societal positioning.

To enable converts to Islam to emerge from the conceptual wilderness, I draw on a further aspect from Simmel’s work, his well-known essay, *The Stranger* (1950). The section below turns to a discussion of this concept, pointing to its use and relevance for this study. My main concern

here is with delineating the relational characteristics of the stranger as a fruitful way of approaching social dynamics of belonging for converts. Following an outline of these characteristics, I then consider some critiques of aspects of this conceptualization in the literature on the stranger and suggest that for the purposes here, they do not offer better analytical resources. In part this is because in many ways they echo aspects of the discussion in chapter 2 in relation to everyday multiculturalism.

Emerging from the conceptual wilderness: Simmel's *stranger*

Simmel's short essay, at just six pages, has had an influence extending beyond possibly any other of Simmel's writings (Levine, 1991). The literature surrounding the stranger as a social type has burgeoned and been the departure point for the social types of the 'marginal man' (Park, 1928; Stonequist, 1935), the 'newcomer' (Wood, 1934; Schuetz, 1944), the 'sojourner' (Siu, 1952), and the 'flâneur' (Bauman, 1993), and has been credited with establishing conceptual foundations for the field of intercultural communication studies (Rogers, 1999).

The ongoing influence of Simmel's essay is also reflected in two more recent journal special issues devoted to the concept (for introductions see: Marotta, 2012a; Jackson, Harris and Valentine, 2016). As a concept it now traverses various additions and emphases, often having produced more confusion than clarity about its definition. It has, for example, been conflated with the 'newcomer' and the 'marginal man' (McLemore, 1991; Levine, 1991; Harman, 1987). These confusions may stem from the fact that Simmel's essay originally appeared as "a note, a mere digression" (Levine, 1991: 273), and many of the critiques directed at Simmel need to be understood in the context of this brief and summary character of the essay. Further developments of the concept have included, amongst others, strangeness as a condition of urban life (Lofland, 1973; Harman, 1987; Bauman, 1995), or of life in the contemporary (postmodern) world (Bauman, 1988), psychoanalytic conceptions of how we are 'strangers to ourselves' (Kristeva, 1991), and the stranger-as-figure, that is, social, spatial and/or cultural strangers. The stranger-as-figure has been used to delineate as strangers, amongst others, ethnic minorities (Park, 1928; Amin, 2012), migrants (Diken, 1998; Amin, 2012), the poor and 'flawed' or 'non'-consumers (Bauman, 1991, 1997). It is imperative then to be clear on how the conception is being used.

In *The Stranger* Simmel identified the singular characteristic of the *stranger*⁹ as one of "an attitude of objectivity," from which "he [sic] is freer practically and theoretically; he surveys conditions with less prejudice; his criteria for them are more general and more objective

⁹ To indicate that when I am using the term 'stranger' meant in reference to Simmel's conception, it is italicised throughout.

ideals". This characteristic of objectivity stems from the fact that "as the person who comes today and stays tomorrow" in relation to the group under question, "he has not belonged to it from the beginning, that he imports qualities into it, which do not and cannot stem from the group itself".

The characteristic of objectivity is of course problematic to the point of being unattainable. Nevertheless, Simmel's characterization offers a good starting point to understanding the patterns and dynamics of belonging for British converts to Islam. This is not least because Simmel did not mean objective in the sense of positivist knowledge free of influence. For Simmel, the objective and subjective cannot be separated (Marotta, 2010; 2012b) – something also evident in his discussions of *religiosity* and *religion*. The *stranger* is not *actually* freer in this regard. Rather, it registers the core aspect of distance in the relation as an alternative subjective position from which a critical conversation can emerge.

Significantly, the *stranger* is also "an element of the group itself" (Simmel, 1950: 402). As such, the position is one of being both near and far. That is, a person may be part of a group in a spatial sense while still not in a social sense; they may be *in* a group but not *of* it (McLemore, 1991). This simultaneous relation of nearness and remoteness is at the heart of Simmel's conception of the stranger. In fact, Simmel is quite clear that the *stranger* as "no 'owner of soil'" is meant in both a physical (territorial) as well as figurative (social) sense, and how the *stranger* is considered by others is important for this (Simmel, 1950: 403). The *stranger* is, therefore, both a structural figure and a form of relation.

Importantly, Simmel's stranger does not seek assimilation and carries the positive sense of contribution (Simmel, 1950). The stranger is able, as such, to "problematize the normal, accepted ways" in a society or of a group (Harman, 1987: 16). This makes the *stranger* distinct from the newcomer, who may assimilate from a temporary position (McLemore, 1991; Harman, 1987; also Wood, 1934), and from the marginal man, which has been focused on ethnic minorities in 'contact zones', and who may aspire to full membership characterized by a kind of restlessness and instability based on divided loyalties (Levine, 1991; also Harman, 1987). In contrast, the qualities of nearness and distance of the *stranger* are not opposing positions that somehow need to be overcome, they are co-present in the position of the *stranger* (Levine, 1991) as a characteristic of the social relations between the *stranger* and society, and groups therein (Koefoed & Simonsen, 2011). While it may be feasible that a particular type of *stranger* may lose their strangeness over time, this is neither inevitable nor necessary, and what distinguishes the *stranger* from the newcomer, for instance.

It is these qualities that give the *stranger* continued relevance for "bring[ing] us into contact with the limits of ourselves; he [sic] is a figure of fascination because he reveals to us what lies

beyond the familiar” (Tiryakian, 1973: 57). We must not necessarily be so one-sided, however. As much as ‘we’ may learn from the *stranger*, so too the *stranger* learns from ‘us’. The *stranger* for Simmel is neither necessarily a definite friend or enemy, may be positively or negatively received, and may either reinforce or undermine binary thinking (Marotta, 2010), Simmel being directly critical of crude binary thinking (Marotta, 2012b; also Bauman, 1991). The *stranger* is not a position of epistemological advantage to finding commonality but is rather a site and relation of critical conversation between self and other and between commonality and difference.

The *stranger* (re)considered

While a number of works have sought to identify who modern strangers are (Bauman, 1988, 1995; Diken, 1988; Harman, 1987), recent critiques seek to develop the relational aspect of the stranger against an emphasis on stranger-as-figure. In order to focus more on the characteristics of the relation and interaction rather than the figure Horgan (2012) offers the concept of *strangeness*, for example. For some, ‘strangers’ are definitional to modernity (Vernon, 2014) and have become a core feature of much work on urban life. Iveson has noted that for many cosmopolitan urban theorists “the co-presence of strangers literally defines modern urban life” (2006: 71). As Lofland’s evocative phrase suggests, the city, or at least its public space, is ‘a world of strangers’ (Lofland, 1973), the stranger being one personally unknown but visually or categorically familiar. Iveson discerned two understandings of the stranger in urban cosmopolitan theory: “a particular kind of body from elsewhere” and estrangement as a “condition of urban life” (2006: 72). For some, this latter has led to a claim that we are all strangers, with the idea of the ‘cosmopolitan stranger’ (Harman, 1987; relatedly Bauman, 1988, 1993). In this context the one unfamiliar with the language of strangeness becomes the anomaly (Harman, 1987). This idea of everybody as strangers has been criticized, however, for oversimplifying relations by implicitly suggesting that this brings people together as strangers, therefore losing critical force (Jackson, Harris and Valentine, 2016). Furthermore, Iveson, mirroring the earlier discussion of everyday multiculturalism, remains skeptical of the ability of ‘the city’ to provide a vision of open and welcoming cosmopolitan cohabitation on the grounds that these models “stand outside place and time” and he is suspicious of its ability to be able to settle a cosmopolitan vision “in advance of politics” (2006: 82, 84). He argues for a processual concept, focused on specific circumstances.

More substantive developments of the term along these lines have focused on how the stranger is constructed discursively and through encounters. Ahmed (2000) has argued that the stranger should be seen as produced in the encounter; the encounter being prior to the ‘stranger’. This, for Ahmed, avoids ontologizing the stranger-as-figure and the danger of ‘stranger fetishism’,

which she sees as concealing social relationships and boundary making. Ahmed argues that multiculturalism involves stranger fetishism: the stranger is produced by the discourse of welcoming the stranger, the act of inclusion itself being a process of 'othering' (Ahmed, 2000). Strangers and difference are here then constituted in their recognition. By foregrounding the encounter, however, there is the danger of ahistoricizing and apoliticizing the stranger. Ahmed recognizes the limits of her formulation in this regard and seeks to avoid it by highlighting how "each encounter reopens past encounters" (2000: 8) such that the stranger cannot be, as Schuetz's newcomer, "a man [sic] without a history" (1944: 502). This then emphasizes that strangers are not 'unknown' but rather already (mis)recognised. However, given this pre-encounter (mis)recognition, this does not resolve a tension between stranger-as-figure and a disontologised figure, nor some of the issues already discussed in relation to the 'encounter' and 'contact'. Rather it points to this tension as an important dynamic.

Alexander, likewise, argues that: "We discover that the employment of the language of strangeness creates the strangeness of a status, not the other way around" (Alexander, 2013: 85-86). He critiques the stranger-as-figure, or what we might here refer to as 'structural strangers', and in contrast offers a category of what we might call 'symbolic strangers'. Alexander calls us to consider the context that produces the stranger. He argues that a structural view of the stranger cannot capture "elements of deeply experienced emotion and profoundly convincing belief, that make strangeness so much more awful and demonic than Simmel allowed" (Alexander, 2013: 98).

Jackson, Harris and Valentine (2016) aim to develop Alexander's and Ahmed's renderings, emphasizing a move away from seeing the stranger as a 'given category' instead focusing on the stranger's discursive construction and the stranger as experience (also Bennett and Crawley-Jackson, 2016; Koefoed and Simonsen, 2016). They urge for a conception that goes "beyond categories" (2016: 10) and seek a fluid stranger-as-practice (2016: fn 1: 12). In this vein, albeit with less dark overtones than Alexander and dropping down to the micro-level, scholars have similarly emphasised specificity of contexts (Iveson, 2006) and how this affects roles and performances of the stranger (Koefoed and Simonsen, 2016).

These have all been significant developments of the concept, and ones that have served to shift its conceptual emphasis. Yet, the relational and figurative is, as mentioned above, already present in Simmel's formulation. It is necessary, therefore, to ask what we lose by emphasizing one aspect at the expense of the other. This has already been noted in relation to Ahmed. As we have seen in the trope of betrayal, it is not, as Alexander asserts, "the construction-of difference, not commonality, that makes potentially marginal groups into dangerous ones" (Alexander, 2013: 83). Rather, it is here precisely the aspects of commonality, or nearness, and difference, or distance, that cause such unease. This, moreover, can be seen at the heart of

the equal unease in converts' relations to born Muslim communities. Difference, viewed in this way, is cast as a problem to be overcome. How difference may be liberative and a source of claims making to challenge those dominant forces is lost. Secondly, in denying the stranger-as-figure by avoiding categorical thinking, the tension between what I referred to above as object positioned and subject positioning likewise becomes lost.

The strength of Simmel's rendering is in holding the tensions and play between the individual and social and between nearness and distance. Marotta argues that the *stranger* "signifies both a figure and a social and spatial relation; it represents both an internal and external other" (2012a: 585), highlighting that the *stranger* is not a fixed category. This is significant when, as we will see, converts can be made stranger-as-figure in a negative sense, whilst position themselves as relational *strangers* in a contributory sense. We can see much more easily in Simmel's formulation how the *stranger* may represent a form of difference which can form part of the solution. Through considering the literature, we have already begun to see how such tensions as they relate to identity and belonging for British converts to Islam operate. On the one hand, this conception allows a view of converts as they are *made strange*, that is, the way in which they are seen and positioned by others based on ideas of nearness and distance. This is the task of chapter 7, which looks at how converts may be 'othered' by majority society, family and friends, as well as by Muslim communities. On the other hand, it also allows us to see how converts position themselves as *strange* in its positive, contributory sense. That is, how they might position themselves also with reference to nearness and distance. This is done in chapter 8, where how converts position themselves as insider and outsider along religious and cultural lines in relation to majority society and born Muslims is explored.

Chapter 5: Methodology

The preceding theoretical discussion has methodological implications, particularly with regard to religious identity. Therefore, this chapter goes beyond merely describing how the project was carried out and also develops further the theoretical positions I have been outlining in the previous chapters regarding identity and belonging. This chapter discusses the methodology used and introduces the empirical design of the project, my participants, sampling, ethical considerations, discussion of data analysis and interpretation, and initial considerations of reflexivity and my position as part of the research process.

It is useful at this point to recall and summarise the main considerations for methodology stemming from the discussion as it has developed so far that will orient the discussion here. Firstly, a methodology is required that is open to the epistemological and ontological considerations outlined in the preceding chapters, notably one that is able to avoid simply multiplying discrete and distinct categorical facets of identity, and one which has an openness to the divine. This latter point indicates an immediate methodological consideration, this being the explicit epistemological orientation adopted regarding the religious, and which will be discussed in the opening section below. As part of identity and meaning-making, it must also be one which allows the dynamics of continuity and change, and *religiosity* and *religion* to emerge, and these will be addressed in the sections which follow.

Methodological agnosticism

As an important first step, we need a sociological imagination which involves an empathy with rationales that lie outside it. As was mentioned in chapter 3, religious and theological aspects of conversion suggest an epistemological implication: that we bring a 'theological ear' to such sociological endeavours as a way of orienting sociological understanding and listening in a way that does not avoid or reduce elements of *religiosity*, so central to participants' subjectivity, to ethnicity or culture, and is also attuned to a conversation between the sociological and theological principles.

The broader point made above about a paradigmatic secular imaginary can be seen evident in sociological conceptualisations of religious identity as identified in chapters 2 and 3, meaning that such sociological enquiry has been necessarily oriented by a methodological atheism (Berger, 1973), with assertions such as the "sociologist must leave out the divine half of the equation" when studying conversion (Bainbridge, 1992: 178). As one commentator has noted, methodological atheism has been a "virtually taken for granted presupposition of the

sociological study of religion” (Porpora, 2006: 57). Religion and religious identity are peripheral to the secular centre in this arena, so too is religious identity peripheral in these frameworks for understanding religious conversion and identity. Yet this belies that social constructionism and sociology itself cannot remain immune from epistemological critique (Porpora, 2006; Cantrell, 2015). Milbank in fact accuses the methodological atheism of sociology of being its own form of metaphysics that acts as a “secular policing of the sublime” (Milbank, 2006: 106).

To address this issue, I suggest that a methodological approach characterised by a methodological agnosticism is necessary and appropriate. A methodological agnosticism is one where the religious is not bracketed off in such a way that it is in effect bracketed away, but rather recognises the productive uncertainty in studying belief as epistemologically constructive (Bell & Taylor, 2014). An approach guided by a methodological agnosticism, in contrast to methodological atheism, asserts that with “the principle of the bracket we neither affirm nor deny the existence of the gods” but recognize God as part of the believers’ phenomenological environment (Smart, 1973: 54; also Repstad, 1996; Porpora, 2006). In contrast to methodological atheism’s position, which sees these aspects as other-worldly and therefore unempirical, this orientation recognises the link between the ‘other-worldly’ and ‘this-worldly’ and the meaningful depth and significance of this link (Cantrell, 2016). God, from this position is not merely an *explanans*, but an *explanandum* (Banton, 2016; Woodhead 2012), which can therefore posit an alternative explanation.

To not open the epistemological door risks deeply mischaracterising, and therefore mistheorising and misrecognising those who we are studying. Moreover, this approach bears on a complaint of converts that they would like to have their conversion read “from the inside out rather than from the outside in” (Suleiman, 2013: 3). While we must attend to both, I address this issue by taking a stance through which “pushing sociology into theology permits it to ask questions of those for whom a leap of faith is acceptable for the sense of the ultimate it can realize, when everything else in culture seems senseless” (Flanagan, 2008: 258). This is not to argue for a normative replacement but rather for a legitimate normative alternative. As such, “the dispute between the theist and the atheist is... [viewed as] not a dispute between rival hypotheses but between rival ways of seeing the world” (Azari and Birnbacher, 2004: 912). The significance of a methodological agnosticism lies in its capacity and openness towards the ontological character of religious experience. By working with such a conception, it may be possible for a sociological enquiry to view religion *sub specie aeternitatis* (as eternal) while itself being *sub specie temporis* (temporally limited) (Berger, 1973: 182). This has significant implications for approaching issues of continuity and change that arise.

Subsequently, beginning with a methodology which allows participants' understandings and meaning frames to emerge is fundamental. This is important to my wider argument of reading British converts to Islam as multicultural subjects. Given these considerations a narrative methodology was adopted. The following sections set out the narrative methodology used, its features and rationale, and whilst doing so, develop the theoretical position towards identity and belonging that is pursued in the following chapters.

Narrative

Narrative has a long history and while the exact beginnings of narrative study in the human sciences may be contested, the 'narrative turn' is generally traced back to the 1960s (Riessman, 2008: 14). Hyvärinen (2010) identifies four 'turns' in narrative. The first came in literary studies in the 1960s, where structuralist scholars such as Lévi-Strauss and Barthes were heavily influenced by Vladimir Propp's analyses of the underlying narrative structure of Russian folk tales. This was followed by a narrative turn in historiography. The third turn occurred in the social sciences in the 1980s when a number of works that would prove seminal appeared (also Riessman, 2008), and which preceded the "real deluge beginning later in the 1990s", marking a move in the literature toward the metaphoric of 'life as narrative' (Hyvärinen, 2010: 74-75). The fourth turn is a broader socio-cultural turn to narrative in which narratives in various forms abound in the cultural and social milieu more widely. There is not the space or need to expand upon these developments at length. For my purposes, it is from the third and fourth of these that this project takes its cue. I am not here focussed on uncovering or investigating underlying formal narrative structure or as such delimiting what 'counts' as narrative (see Labov and Waletzky, 1966). I am explicitly not trying to uncover in such formal terms the structure of conversion narratives and describe their common parts as a way of identifying something that we can call, and thereby use to identify, a 'conversion narrative'. I am interested in how through narrative British converts to Islam develop senses of identity and belonging. It is narrative's suitability for this task that the following sections will explicate.

Characteristics of narrative

Narrative is particularly suited to the study of identity and subjectivity as it gives prominence to human agency (Riessman, 1993; Depperman, 2013). Moreover, its approach to this, as one in which "people are not to be seen as mere products of their culture nor as completely free agents but as relatively free" (Hänninen, 2004: 76), likewise provides links to reading how people are embedded in a social context. Both these aspects of personal identity and social context in relation to narrative will be drawn out in the sections below.

This approach avoids analyses in which narratives are (merely) collected, described and 'presented' (Atkinson & Delamont, 2006). Narratives are not simply things 'out there' to be gathered as accounts of things 'in there'. In fact, as Eakin points out, such a belief in invariant memory or the possibility of re-experiencing earlier states of self-hood has no support from research in brain studies (Eakin, 2008).

A narrative methodology offers a particular orientation toward identity and self-making that is processual and views the self as "a story which is forever being written" (Andrews citing Bruner, 2000: 78) and argues that the self is in significant ways made through narratives. It is, therefore, not understood as a fixed entity but rather a dynamic "awareness in process" (Eakin, 1999: x). It is not then that narrative reveals an underlying, fixed truth about identity, but that it reveals aspects of how identity is (continually) experienced, developed, and understood.

The significance of a narrative approach can first be seen in the observation that narratives can be found everywhere: individuals have them, clubs, organisations; there are institutional narratives and national narratives amongst many others.

Narrative's significance for these processes lies in its fundamental position: stories abound in all aspects of life. As Barbara Hardy (1975: 4) eloquently remarked:

"It is hard to take more than a step without narrating. Before we sleep each night we tell over to ourselves what we may also have told to others, the story of the past day. We mingle truths and falsehoods, not always quite knowing where one blends into the other... We begin the day by narrating to ourselves and probably to others our expectations, plans, desires, fantasies and intentions. The action in which the day is passed coexists with a reverie composed of the narrative revision and rehearsals of past and future... We meet our colleagues, family, friends, intimates, acquaintances, strangers, and exchange stories, overtly and covertly... The stories of our days and the stories in our days are joined in that autobiography we are all engaged in making and remaking, as long as we live, which we never complete, though we all know how it is going to end."

From this quotation a number of important aspects and considerations emerge that will be discussed in what follows: the orientation to the past, to the future, the roles of truth and falsity in narrative constructions, the role of reflection, memory and emotion and how these blend to make the stories we tell each other and ourselves, and by so doing, how we in important ways make ourselves and our contexts. It is important to note here, particularly in reference to truth and falsity, that what is meant is not that these can be uncovered or that we are telling lies to ourselves or others, but rather that it is through the process of telling in which the past may be

reconstructed and the future envisioned that life is given meaning (McAdams, 1993). Narrative, as Ricoeur (1990) has argued, is both quasi-historical and quasi-fictive. The narrative interview can elicit and allow aspects of this to emerge. That is, it is a site where the *hows* of construction can be held together with the *whats* of lived reality for those doing the telling (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000).

If this is the case for the significance of narrative more broadly, the following sections outline more specifically how a narrative methodology is relevant to studying identity and belonging.

Narrative and identity

It has been widely argued that narrative is a fundamental form of meaning-making in our lives as we navigate our way through our sense of personal desires and social and cultural context, perhaps the primary way individuals make sense of experience. Drawing on Hardy, Ken Plummer suggests that narrative has become “one of the central roots we have into the continuing quest for understanding human meaning”, such that we may well be thought of as *homo narrans* (1995: 5; also McAdams, 1993). That is, that “for many the telling of a tale comes as a major way of ‘discovering who one really is’. It is a voyage to explore the self” (Plummer, 1995: 34). Or as Freeman has expressed it: “even though life is not quite narrative, it is close enough” (2013: 228). In fact, it has also been argued, against a clean separation between experience and accounts, that “account and experience are tied together in complex relation to each other, and to the embodied cultural and social worlds in which they are experienced and expressed” (Bender, 2007: 214). This is not, however, to suggest that life is (or is merely) narrative (cf Eakin, 1999). There is no direct and “one-to-one relation” between the narrative and the inner life of the teller (Hänninen & Koski-Jännes, 2010: 105). Rather, “owing to the essential openness (the not-quiteness or not-yetness) of ongoing life, narrative emerges as a vehicle precisely for putting one’s life – and oneself – in perspective” (Freeman, 2013: 229). It is through narrative forms, in their variety, that experiences are organised. As such, narrative is at the core of self-formation and understanding human experience and how someone experiences and understands life (Polkinghorne, 1988; Atkinson, 1998; Riessman, 1993, 2008).

As part of identity work, narrative includes the twin aspects of narratology (backward-oriented) and futurology (forward-oriented) in understanding narratives that are told in the present. It is from this that the importance of continuity and change, and the dynamics between these two aspects in narrative arises and is important as a consideration for identity work, signalling the importance of temporality in narrative methodology.

To understand this we need to see how what Ricoeur (1980) has called *emplotment* is constructed through time, where that is conceived as narrative time as opposed to clock time. Elaborating this point, Mishler argues “the act of narrativizing reassigns meaning to events in terms of their consequences, that is, how the story develops and ends, rather than to their temporal place in the sequence of events” (Mishler, 2006: 38; 2010). It is through the story that “the meaning of what would otherwise remain an intolerable sequence of events” is revealed (Cavarero, 2000: 2, quoting Arendt). This is at least in part related to the fact that the relation between memory and time is more complex than one of linearity.

Freeman develops the notion of temporality as a triad, or ‘spheres of temporality’, to suggest how “narrative identity emerges in and through the interplay of past, present, and future in the form of remembering, acting, and imagining” (Freeman, 2013: 223). That is, the meaning of past actions and experiences is attained, and reattained, through reflection and narrative from the perspective of the present rather than at the time of their occurrence. As well as the reconstruction of the past, the future is also reimagined as the “developmental teloi” (Freeman, 2013: 231; Brockheimer, 2000; LeFebvre and Blackburn, 2012). Yet, whereas Freeman characterises his approach as that of “very much a continuity theorist”, I wish to begin to use this to expand the notion to one of very much a coherence, or congruity, theorist. This is something I elaborate in chapter 6. This is to avert the danger of emphasising continuity against change, when, as I have already stressed, it is the dynamics between the two that forms the central problematic.

Ricoeur explains how this can be so by distinguishing between identity as *idem*, the sense of ‘being the same’, and identity as *ipse*, the sense of being ‘self-same’. *Ipse* as self-sameness or self-constancy “rests on a temporal structure that conforms to the model of dynamic identity arising from the poetic composition of a narrative identity” (Ricoeur, 1990: 246). A personal narrative is then a form of relating oneself to oneself, or to memories or future imaginings of oneself (see for example Day Sclater, 2003; Cavarero, 2000; Taylor, 2010). As Stadlbauer suggests with more specific regard to faith development narratives, they are “rhetorical practices of identity construction, personal movement, and self-realization” (Stadlbauer, 2012; see also Krotofil, 2011). The overall coherence of a narrative lies in the processual dynamics between aspects of continuity and change as part of the process of (ongoing) self- and meaning-making, realized through narrative reflection and telling. It is through this process that people “impose order on the flow of experience to make sense of events and actions in their lives” (Riessman, 1993: 2; also Plummer, 1995, 2001). It is for these reasons that a narrative approach to religious identity is “the right tool for the right job” (Yamane, 2000: 172; also Ammerman, 2003). Yet it remains underused in studies of conversion to Islam.

Narrative and belonging

Jerome Bruner's work, coming out through the second and third turns identified by Hyvärinen, has been amongst the most influential in the development of narrative studies. The central problematic for his *Acts of Meaning* was to develop a method to focus on meaning and the processes of its construction. In doing this he argues that “to understand man [sic] you must understand how his experiences and his acts are shaped by his intentional states”, and, “the form of these intentional states is realized only through participation in the symbolic systems of the culture” (1990: 33). From this we can begin to see narrative linkages (Gubrium and Holstein, 1998, 2009; Mishler, 2006) and, importantly, 'slippages', or discontinuities, which always exist between personal narratives and their relation to social and cultural resources.

A narrative hermeneutics approach, developing from Bruner's insights, recognises subjects and their narratives exist in historical time, embedded in a context of “*cultural webs of narratives [that] affect the way in which we experience things in the first place*” (Meretoja, 2017: 9, italics in original; also Riessman, 1993). Bruner distinguishes 'canonical narratives', which reference the larger 'cultural shaping' and cultural resources and argues that it is through narrative that normativity is nourished (Bruner, 2004, 1991; Taylor, 2010). Ricoeur in fact suggests that narrative identity as it applies to an individual can also so be applied to a community (1990). Importantly, however, while cultural models of narrative go towards shaping our sense of and a space of possibilities, they do not determine our identities and lives (Meretoja, 2017). Therefore, central questions revolve around contextualising narratives, asking how these stories are emerging in contemporary Britain, how they are emerging in public discourse, how are they being interpreted and what those interpretations are doing. The process of narrative allows the negotiation between the personal and the social as part of identity work and is a core feature of narrative methodologies. Some of this background has been touched on in the introduction, and further consideration of these questions will permeate through the analysis in the proceeding chapters.

Consideration of how these are woven into personal narratives can be extremely revealing. Culture can be seen to 'speak itself' through individual stories, and therefore reveal aspects of social and cultural life (Riessman, 1993). As such narrative is:

“a way of integrating the inner and the outer. The story provides an intermediate or transitional area of experience in which the self continually negotiates its position in the world, inscribes itself in relation to the available cultural scripts, integrates past, present and future through acts of remembering and telling” (Day Sclater, 2003: 328).

Highlighting the link between micro, median and macro levels a comparative study of converts in Flanders and Andalusia by Leman et. al. (2010) found that the ethnicising strategies of convert groups trying to create a space for themselves varied at the median and macro levels but not at the micro. While the dynamics at the micro were similar across both cases, Andalusian converts were able to develop narratives with a common reference to an Islamic past in a way which Flemish converts were not. The development of larger group stories in this way can help locate individual narratives in a larger context and a link between individual life history and a broader sense of history. This can provide a “dialectical hinge between individual and society” (Brockheimer, 2000: 70), and also points to the need to attend to different levels. This can be achieved through comparison of individual narratives to see if commonalities emerge which may relate to or go towards establishing larger narratives, and with what variation (De Fina, 2013). It also requires relating these to consideration of institutional or organisational narratives (Linde, 2000) as well as relating these to national level discourses and the wider psychosocial context (De Fina, 2013; Ammerman, 2003; Shoshana, 2013). Significantly, this is also where a ‘theological ear’ can be revealing, as this can situate personal narratives in relation to canonical narratives of faith and practice.

For British converts to Islam this is highly salient as the process of conversion itself necessitates a negotiation of apparently competing social and cultural scripts and consequently, personal, biographical stories can reveal much about the social world they inhabit. Moreover, this provides the basis for assessing this link between the dimensions of the personal, social and divine, which may reproduce and be constitutive of those already existing narrative scripts as well as, through a form of narrative agency, challenge or contribute to them (Brockmeier, 2009; Meretoja, 2017).

For example, Leman et al.'s findings further indicate that these conversions are socially and structurally relevant as they are both (to varying extents) a turning away from the dominant social frame whilst turning toward a new religious frame, with the result that both are affected (also Scranton, 2015). Through this process of personal narratives becoming linked with collective ones, and emerging as public ones, these narratives can in turn help to create hearers for their narratives. This can also challenge the existing restrictions on narrative space and understanding of and for their stories and serve to open up space for emergent subject positions. How subjects relate to, adapt and modify positions they are put into by others can be revealing about social relations, and can “work to both legitimate and to critique relations of power” (Langellier & Peterson, 2004: 25).

As well as the temporal aspect, part of redeveloping worlds as part of religious conversion is how relations to and conceptions of space may shift (Baynham, 2003). Both time and space need to be read as constitutive to the narrative. This allows for an analysis that looks at how in

both time and space, subjects position themselves and relate how they feel positioned by others, and how these reveal understandings that are shared or unshared (De Fina, 2003).

Freeman again offers a helpful framework for thinking about these linkages through narrative explicitly concerned with the relational dimension of narrativity, and the sources of identity. In conjunction to his spheres of temporality he also offers a spatial triad, 'spheres of otherness' (Freeman, 2013). This includes relations to proximal and distal sources of identity. By proximal, he refers to the sense of self one has from within (2013; 2010b). By distal, he refers to relations with others, which notably has further relevance as "the particular Other to which we are related is in no way limited to the human realm" (Freeman, 2013: 234). Here we find the space to include God (see also Ammerman, 2003). This again helps orient the exploration of these relational and locational aspects of identity and identifications in directions which can avoid a blunt sociological reductionism. Mishler (2006) argues that the restorying process discussed in the previous section is a feature of how our identity(ies) sit in relation to other aspects of our lives. Such a relational approach oriented towards 'spheres of otherness' offers a pertinent framework through which to explore the religion and culture divide.

Narrative and emotion

An important aspect implicitly suggested by the discussion is that of emotion, not least because as Barbalet reminds us "no action can occur in society without emotional involvement" (2002: 2; also Minami, 2000). It is not difficult to see how these are salient in something as important as religious conversion. In fact, it has been argued that narrated memories are far richer and more complex in emotion than non-narrated ones (Fioretti and Smorti, 2015). The embodiment of emotion in the narrative, as the narrative account itself, represents how these emotions are constructed in the present, rather than being recalls of past emotional states, even when this is apparently what the narrator is doing (Young, 2000). Given the significance for a person's life, sense of self as an individual person, sense of self as a social person, and sense of how one relates to the wider social context through such an important event as religious conversion, a reading of both as phases of a narrative analysis is necessary (also Taylor, 2010).

This suggests that two concomitant logics are at work in narrative. The first is the cognitive, which is especially suggested by the idea of reflexivity. The second is an emotional logic to avoid remaining tied to a purely linguistic and textual approach, and one reason why however close narrative is to life, it is decidedly not equal to it. That is, it challenges any assertion that there is no self apart from language (see Plummer, 1995; Freeman, 2003).

Narrative is also well-positioned to access the emotional aspect of experience and meaning-making. Just as with personal emotions, emotional processes are also integral components of social experience (Ellis & Flaherty, 1992; also Bruner, 1986). Middleton talks about the 'cultural ordering' of emotion, how emotion is culturally patterned and varies between differing social and cultural contexts (Middleton, 1989; also Harré, 1986). Riis and Woodhead develop a conception of 'religious emotional regimes' to capture the influence of the social and also, crucially, to show how emotional experience arises from the dialectic between an individual and society (Riis & Woodhead, 2012; also Davies, 2011; Wetherell, 2012, 2015). They suggest seeing the constant process of balance or disruption between the personal and the social as a two-way feedback loop with emotions forming part of the social interaction. Followingly, an emotional logic can help us read cultural norms and where these may be felt in dissonance and how this is managed.

Narrative and memory

Eakin argues that narrative and memory could be thought of as identity's "twin supporting structures" (Eakin, 2008: 2). Memory is inseparable, though separate (Fioretti and Smorti, 2015), from narrative. Memory and remembering itself involves reconstructing and co-constructing and is a sight of linkage between personal and social dimensions (Barclay and Smith, 1992). Though experienced as personal, memory is also cultural as it "draws on countless scraps and bits of knowledge and information from the surrounding culture, and is inserted into larger cultural narratives" (Hodgkin & Radstone, 2003: 5). Barclay and Smith argue that the primary function of memory is not to preserve the past but rather to adapt it to enrich the present (1992), and we may add here, with a view to the future also (also Hodgkin & Radstone, 2003). As such, the experiential past is, through the act of remembering and narrating, brought into the present and given meaning (Smith and Watson, 2010).

The larger group stories developed by the Andalusian converts in Leman et al. discussed above are also relevant here as this kind of work can affect and develop larger senses of historical and collective memory which serve to help create and sustain an 'imagined community'. In this way narrative interviewing:

"is useful not only for what [it] reveal[s] about private lives but also for what [it] tell[s] us about social life. Apart from their individual level, memory narratives convey information on many levels; the group level, the national level or on the global level. Memory, in its function as an integrator of the individual experience into larger unities, ensures an enlargement of the horizon and offers an interpretation of life. Thus it allows us to locate and

explain individual experiences in the context of wider social trends”
(Misztal, 2010: 90).

Not only do individuals inherit cultural scripts, but they can also be active in contributing to developing new ones. This link can orient us towards the multicultural and what converts can tell us about ways of reimagining belonging. That is, here we are interested in the social role of the stories, and how these might address social change. The importance of memory then is not one of recalling the past in a linear or 'factual' rendition, but rather its contribution to narrative as it functions “as a selective agency in social reorganization, and its role in interpreting and appealing life for the individual, are important and, moreover, they are not mutually exclusive and indeed at moments support each other” (Misztal, 2010: 96). This again calls a narrative approach to power that sees it in both negative terms, as repressing, silencing, limiting, but also in positive terms, as constructive, creative and constitutive (Plummer, 1995).

Narrative: big or small?

Having established the pertinence of narrative as a methodology that fits well with the overall research concerns, and also developed the theoretical position taken here developing out of the discussions in previous chapters, it remains to distinguish more precisely which type of narrative approach, which also informs the more practical matters of 'method' to both the interview itself and to its subsequent analysis. Given the focus of the study, what has been called a 'big story' approach was used. This section contrasts this with so called 'small stories' and develops the arguments for a 'big story' approach.

Big stories ask the participant to recount their life story or a particular period of their life. These can be seen in contrast to 'small stories', which view narrative as, and take the narrative forms for research of, everyday interactional practice and how these stories are used in such interaction (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008; Bamberg, 2012). Bamberg is critical of big story approaches, arguing that they offer an artificial narrative withdrawn from everyday interactive practices through which narratives are “shared and come alive” (Bamberg, 2006b: 72). He sees in big stories the spectral lingering of an epistemological positivity and a view of identity as something actually existing (Bamberg, 2006a, 2006b, 2011, 2012; Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008; also Georgakopoulou, 2006, 2013).

Freeman, however, challenges many of Bamberg's assertions. Whilst not denigrating the importance of small story research, he does not see as clearly as Bamberg claims the necessary disjuncture between the two, seeing them instead as complementary. Freeman (2011) sees no necessary reductionism in big story approaches, just a different angle and in

this way macro and micro analysis can be made without necessarily privileging one over the other.

Moreover, Freeman points out that the constructive process in contexts Bamberg wishes to focus on may be more limited than he allows, and that different levels are in fact inseparable and as such not working against each other (Freeman, 2011; also Mishler, 2006). Personal reality includes internal experiences that are not shared in such conversational interactions (Barclay and Smith, 1992), or at the very least are shared differently. While this is always true for both small and big stories, small stories can make it more difficult to account for, or even hear, expressions such as from one of my participants of how “they didn’t know the real me”, or how some converts have expressed the sentiment that they might not have become Muslim if they had met Muslims first (Suleiman, 2013, 2015). It also is not so well able to investigate change and continuity as part of the identity and meaning-making process of conversion, in part at least because it requires a more extended time frame. Furthermore, this also does not make small stories as amenable to researching events such as conversion as the subjective ontology of participants, and its narrative emergence, becomes limited. This is not about being able to get at a kind of more positivistic truth of core identity, but about creating the space in which the dimensions of the personal and social can be read in relation.

Important with regard to the above is the role of reflection. As Ricoeur notes (invoking Socrates), “the self of self-knowledge is the fruit of an examined life” (1990: 247). Freeman suggests that while interaction may provide much of the data which is later reflected upon (2011; 2010b; also LeFebvre and Blackburn, 2012), the primary site of identity work is done through such reflection in a more distanced mode through big(ger) stories (Freeman, 2011; also Hänninen, 2004). One of my participants, Matthew, remarked about an hour and twenty minutes into the interview how “I suppose it’s like sort of recapping in me [sic] own head but out loud”. Of course, and as I hope is apparent from the discussion throughout this chapter, there is no necessary reliance on a static positivist epistemology and the practice of narration can be accounted for just as well in big story approaches. As another participant, Susanne, said towards the end of her interview: “I think when I was talking I realised how important it is to voice the actual journey. Whereas I think a lot of times people think that it’s very static, it’s a very dynamic thing when people search for their faith and it’s never stagnant, you know”. As Freeman contends, it is a matter of angle and emphasis.

Contrary to Bamberg’s claim, and evident in the preceding discussion, big story approaches also view narrative as a process. However, the process here is focussed on reflection rather than interaction, or perhaps more precisely conversational interaction (reflection is of course its own form of interaction). Moreover, this reflection is also a form of interacting with wider social narratives. There is no reason, therefore, that a positioning analysis (Bamberg, 2008; De Fina,

2013; Depperman, 2013) cannot be applied to big story research taking this into account. Some studies (for example, Wortham, 2000) have focussed on how in big story narratives subjects position themselves within interactional patterns, also noting how the representational aspects of the narrative are likewise important, or the relationship of small stories to big(ger) stories in an extended personal narrative (LeFebvre and Blackburn, 2012).

An extended personal narrative also has the merit of allowing the space for stories which are not normally heard to emerge as their tellers would like. For example, one of my participants, Richard, remarked at the end of the interview how he thought I was the right person to be doing this research. The reasons he said this are revealing here. We had had no extended discussion of the issues under consideration and other than the basic information from my pre-interview information sheet and our introductions he knew little about me other than what he had surmised during the course of our two hours together. Rather, what this referred to was a point he had also made earlier about his so often being a story interrupted. I was not the first person to ask him to relate his story, but I was the first to let him tell it. As he commented, most people ask for something they want and then walk away when they either have it or if it seems they are not going to get it, a point also made by Saoirse who said it was good to be able to “talk about what’s in [her] heart”. This can be one way in which conversation is a very different type of interaction. Through turn-taking, agreeing, contradicting, posting similarities and differences, individual stories and reflections are squeezed into a particular shape and pattern. This was something that had frustrated Richard previously, yet the narrative approach allowed him the space he felt lacking in other types of interaction supposedly about his story. Similarly, towards the end of her interview, Kate was talking about why she hasn’t yet told some friends about her conversion and had been explaining about the lack of understanding and at times explicit hostility she faced when she did so. She remarked: “I don’t like telling people that I’ve converted... I just don’t like saying that I’ve converted, getting into that conversation... And I don’t want people to interrogate me. I don’t wanna do that. So that’s why I didn’t say it: I don’t want people to ask me questions”. The question for the interviewer thus arises, why is she telling me about her conversion, answering my questions? I believe that part of the answer lies in the understanding that I would not be ‘interrogating’ her, that here was a space where she could tell her story, and clearly wanted to, rather than feeling constantly dragged into the stories and frames of the listeners (or questioners). These quotes also reflect well the flow of power through interaction and how being able to tell your story in the first place is in itself part of this. It is not that small is better than big or vice-versa, but that they each focus on a different aspect of how stories are told, constructed and the work that is done with and in them.

The interview itself did not follow a question schedule but created an open space for emergence and for the participant to set the trajectory. In the narrative interviews, participants

were invited to tell the story of their conversion or 'journey' to Islam, to begin and go wherever they liked. This phase proceeded uninterrupted by the interviewer other than for expressions, body language and sounds indicating active listening. This initial stage lasted anywhere between two and a half minutes and one and three-quarter hours. During this stage I made notes on certain important parts of the narrative to follow up for expansion or clarification. Follow up questions were then asked, taking the form of asking for further expansion on particular points that emerged as interesting and important, and these foregrounded the words and phrasing of the participants. I asked the participant to expand on these aspects of the narrative with prompts such as, "You said... Could you tell me more about...". In this way the focus was kept on stories and experiences rather than pre-determined questions and answers. This put me in the role of what Plummer terms a coxer, "pok[ing] and prob[ing] for the personal narrative" as a way of hearing "tales of normalcy" (Plummer, 1995: 21) rather than the 'bizarre human beings' of other stories. When this had also come to an end, I invited the participant to say anything that was important they felt they hadn't included yet or would like to say more about. At times they had nothing to add, a couple subsequently followed up with emails, several added a new point they had forgotten about before, and several used this opportunity to reinforce points they had already made, albeit at times in a less storied way. Finally, I went through an information sheet with them to ensure I had collected important demographic details – this itself in some instances invited further story telling. Overall, the interviews lasted anywhere between one and four hours.

Narrative analysis

A narrative analysis requires a number of phases and detailed discussion of this is the subject of the following chapters. For reading the personal a two-fold dual logic of emplotment was followed. The first analysed the emotional and cognitive logics. This traced the development and thematic linkages in the narrative and the significance, as a result, which events have for each other (Polkinghorne, 1988). In contrast to thematic coding, this process preserves the sequences of the narrative and their relational development, also paying attention to 'narrative time' to ensure the story is kept intact (Riessman, 2008). The second, as part of these, draws on Freeman's spheres of temporality triad and traces how continuity and change developed as a significant part of how meaning-making is constructed. This also includes attention to body language and tone as important aspects of the meaning conveyed, not least as part of the embodiment of emotions in the narrative. Another way in which this became further evident is through self-talk, being the intra-personal aspects of stories (Fraser, 2004).

Phases of reading the social analysed aspects of positioning, drawing on Freeman's relational spheres of otherness triad. The primary framework here was tracing the relational dynamics of

the religion-culture divide. This involved analysing how people, as individuals and groups (including the narrator), are positioned in relation to the narrator as well as to each other to track the proximal and distal sources. It includes, for instance, how they are positively or negatively represented, at which times, in which places (both actual, physical and in relation to the narrative), in which relations and with which qualities. In order to build a picture of what narratives are being used it is necessary to look for placement, repetition and association of ideas and concepts. Taken relationally, within an individual participant's account, between and across participants, alongside a reading of documentary material, and alongside a reading of the literature and wider public discourse, this points towards normative social assumptions and positions, as well as frustrations, contestations, and challenges to these. This was further supplemented by asking participants about any particular influences, such as texts, personal, particular scholars, YouTube videos and so on, that have been significant for them as part of their conversion story. This in itself revealed points of commonality and difference and was highly suggestive of a number of the themes to be discussed.

Sampling

Participants were recruited through several networks of convert groups and organisations. For reasons related to the discussion in the introduction, sampling was self-selective with initial contact being made through gatekeepers who disseminated my information through their networks, some more formal and systematic, some less so. People who were interested then contacted me directly via email, phone and text message. The majority of participants replied directly to emails they received through these networks. A few came through New Muslim groups where I attended a meeting to address the group to introduce my research. All participants were given an information sheet and consent form beforehand (see appendix II), explaining the purpose of the research and important ethical considerations. Before the interview we went through this, checking they understood all the points, giving them the opportunity to ask any questions about either the project or ethical considerations, notably that they had the right to withdrawal, how the data would be stored and used, and that they would be anonymised. All names have been anonymized and changed to match in origin the name they use now. Given the deeply personal and at times painful character of some of the stories I heard, I also highlighted before, and at times during, the interview that they could pause or stop the interview at any time, although none did so.

In all, the study consisted of narrative interviews with 25 participants, as well as two further interviews, one with a New Muslim group organiser and one with the head of a national organisation for converts. These latter two interviewees reflected on the work of the organisation or group they run, how this has changed over time, and what the main issues are

from their perspective. Details of participants are presented in Table 1 in appendix I. My sample is broadly reflective of the demographic background sketched in previous studies and the introduction (Brice 2010; Zebiri 2008). The notable exception to this is that around a third of my participants are under 30, whereas suggestions elsewhere are that it might be expected that this would form a larger proportion. Just over half the participants were white British/European, a quarter British Asian, three were Black British and two mixed race; nineteen were female and eight male; just under half had previously been practising Catholic, Protestant or Hindu, while the rest were mostly nominally Protestant, Catholic, Hindu, Sikh or Christian, with two describing themselves formerly as spiritual and three as atheist. They were aged between 18 and 69 and had been Muslim between 10 months and 24 years at the time of interview.

An important part of who is in the sample is also who is not in the sample. One of my most loquacious participants later told me about how she had spoken to other female converts she knows at a New Muslim circle to ask if anyone else was willing to participate. They were not, however, giving the reason of not being sure how my work could potentially be used, not even necessarily by me but by others. This in fact was also expressed directly to me by a couple of people I met in another group and led to me making a point of highlighting at the initial stage of talking through the information sheet that although I would be asked by my funding body to deposit my interviews in a data archive (in anonymised form) where other researchers may access it, for ethical reasons I would not do this if they were not happy with this. On several occasions participants took this option. This fear itself reflects aspects of the wider social context in which these individuals are trying to negotiate themselves as new Muslims. In part it has to be understood in the types of positionings they often find themselves cast into and in relation to how Muslims and Islam are perceived more widely.

More specifically, however, it also reflects, as was related to me on more than one occasion, a distrust of 'outsiders'. For one group, for instance, this was a result of previous experiences with journalists posing as researchers and covertly accessing the group and then writing an extremely negative article. The effect of this meant that even when I had been granted access and given the support of the group organisers, some individuals were still understandably cautious. This further emphasises the ethical considerations of doing research with marginalised groups with genuine concerns about how their words may be used. In response to this, I made a continual point pre-, during and post- interview of highlighting their right to withdraw and withhold from archiving their interview, how they would be anonymised, and how I would use their interviews. None of the people who agreed to participate withdrew at any point. Furthermore, as an unknown non-Muslim man there were also people who would not meet with me for reasons of mixing on the basis of gender. A couple of my participants when talking

about how happy they were to take part mentioned that they knew people who felt this way, one, Amal, even rolling her eyes sarcastically as she told me about it.

Reflexivity

An extremely significant consideration is that of reflexivity and the position of the researcher. I, as the researcher, a man with a history, am just as much a part of the research as the participants and their narratives. Moreover, the research process is both interactional as well as mediated in and through materials and technologies. It is therefore important to reflect upon aspects of narrative reflexivity and the narrative environment, as well as considering the aspects of insider-outsider as part of the process. The narratives are not separate from these considerations but produced and told in relation to them as interconnected: in this regard the telling (narrative event) is just as important as the told (narrated event) (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). Interviews are social events “influenced by not only the identity of those who participate in it, but also the social, temporal and historical context in which it takes place” (Carter, 2004: 353). While the social, temporal and historical context can be found throughout the chapters, what I want to focus on in the following sections is the narrower and more micro aspects of this and the environment in which it takes place. In this section, I first discuss the environmental and material-interactional aspects before moving on to the human-interactional as part of the narrative event itself. The interview situation itself, as an event, involves important aspects of emotion work from the interviewer as well as the interviewee (Hoffman, 2007).

Environmental and material

The majority of the interviews took place in coffee shops at various points of the day and surrounded by varying levels of hustle and bustle. Some took place in more private, quiet settings, such as a meeting room in the work place, mosque or community centre, or at the participant's home. The place and time was decided by the participant and variously reflected the convenience and comfort of the time and place as well as outlooks on social mixing. These settings had a palpable impact on the narrative. It certainly seems no coincidence that in general the more developed and more relaxed (in terms of their more apparent openness rather than the nature of their content) were those in quieter surroundings, although I also caught myself on a number of occasions surprised (pleasantly for the researcher in me) at the openness of some stories when eavesdropping strangers were a higher danger.

Insider – Outsider

Brice has argued that converts distrust researchers, especially those who are not Muslim (Brice, 2008) and Poston switched to documentary research following recruitment difficulties for his study in the United States (1992). This would seem to suggest a difficulty for ‘outsider’, i.e. non-Muslim, researchers. This is not quite so simple, however, as clearly there are people who do want to tell their stories and are, moreover, happy to do so. A couple of gatekeepers even expressed to me that they were pleased that non-Muslim voices were addressing the issues and it was not therefore something that was happening only from ‘within’ and contained in a bubble.

In her study of British converts to Islam Kate Zebiri noted how some themes in the material gathered by her, a non-Muslim, and her research assistant, a young Muslim woman, were different. In this study I have no such counterpoint, but this points to the relation to the researcher as a presence that in important ways mediates the account; narrators ‘edit’ as part of the narrative event as a result of both the human and material and environmental interactions, that is, they are themselves constantly narratively reflective (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). This raises the need to consider issues surrounding the ideas of what have been referred to as insider and outsider research and researchers, with consideration of this dynamic a central concern when studying religion (Knott, 2010). It is necessary to recognise as a starting point that, “the whole value of the insider researcher is not that his [sic] data or insights into the actual social situation are better – but that they are *different*” (Delmos Jones, quoted in Twine, 2000: 13, emphasis in original) or as Anderson puts it “no less true” (quoted in Gunaratnam, 2003: 92).

The insider-outsider dynamics at play in the interviews were complex and intersecting. We can begin by distinguishing between on-paper insider/outsider-ness, and processual in-action insider/outsider-ness; or between commonality and connectivity (see Edwards, 1990; Beoku-Betts, 1994; Gunaratnam, 2003). By the first is meant those identity categories around which much social science work orients such as age, class, gender, race, ethnicity, religion. In relation to these my position as a single, white, middle-class, university educated man in his late thirties with no religious affiliation, although it could be said that I have a nominally Christian background, placed me in relation to my participants in various and varying ways. The only one common factor here in relation to all participants is religious affiliation, as I do not affiliate or identify with any religious tradition.

This, however, is not quite sufficient or straightforward. Firstly is the issue that none of these, or even all of these, categories are of themselves ‘enough’. For instance, Beoku-Betts (1994) and Islam (2000) found that being perceived as sharing race or ethnicity ‘was not enough’ to

bridge social distances. This was not only because such identities were held with different meaning by different communities, but that also gender, profession, class, and for Beoku-Betts her status as unmarried, meant that they were perceived and positioned differently by different participants, affecting what they would be told and even who would talk to them, serving to both include and exclude.

This leads into in-action insider/outsider-ness, by which I mean, as Turgo (2012) comments, that identity in relation to participants is (co)constructed, develops and shifts in the interviews. Other scholars have likewise noted how the identity of the researcher can become transformed (Leigh, 2013; Kanuha, 2000). Identifications such as race, gender, socio-economic background and so on, are not simply a variable but “enter into the research process itself” (Edwards, 1990: 482). Consequently, the very concepts of ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ are extremely complex and not always readily predictable from the perspective of the researcher or the subjects of research. The concepts of insider and outsider cut across a number of identifications, each subject to historical and contextual conditions that combine and shift to construct knowledge of one another in these circumstances as well as the “micro-social interactions” (Gunaratnam, 2003: 85) in the (social) event of a research process and interview itself. As Labaree notes, “entry does not occur once, but is a process” (2002: 110).

Following this it is interesting to note, and I have to admit to my own surprise, that many people did not ask me many, if any, questions about my background, even when I explicitly asked them at different points if they had any. What they surmised (rightly or wrongly) about me from my emails, name, voice, appearance I could only guess. In fact, only a few addressed these sorts of questions at any point throughout the process of the interview. This suggests that I was perceived in professional terms as a researcher. In some interviews this kind of perception certainly seemed to characterise the rapport, while in others a more relaxed rapport developed. This is evident, for example, in how some interviews became more emotive as they developed and as Vidya, for instance, became progressively more swear-y. This in turn may reflect the methodologically agnostic approach as its own part of the rapport.

The following chapters now turn to in-depth analysis and discussion of what emerged out of the narrative interviews. They develop arguments based on patterns that although differently, emerged consistently within and between the narratives. Taking this approach to analysis and writing in some of the important and relevant consistencies can be brought out and discussed in detail, while at the same time giving some space to noting individual variation within these patterns.

Chapter 6: Dynamics of religious identity

This first findings chapter explores in detail the personal aspect of these conversions. This is not a matter of severing it off from the social but is rather a matter of emphasis. The emphasis is to do some justice to the observation that while they have political consequences, conversions are first and foremost personal (Özyürek, 2015). It remains rooted in a relational and layered approach to exploring the dynamics of these stories and allows some of the life of these stories to be brought to bear. Furthermore, this emphasis is also taken on the basis that this aspect of the personal itself is not that of an isolated individual, but its analytical focus is simultaneously the proximal source of identity as a relation to oneself, and a relation to the divine as a distal source. This allows space for these aspects to emerge more fully and crucial aspects of identity and belonging, in particular the often-uneasy relationships between aspects of the personal and social, of continuity and change, and of religion and culture, can be brought out. This is important as this chapter forms the base from which the discussions in chapters 7 and 8 proceed, when the emphasis turns to relational aspects of social belonging. A further reason for the initial emphasis on these personal relational aspects in fact gains importance because of the social embeddedness of the conversions. As Plummer notes: “Stories do not float around abstractly but are grounded in historically evolving communities of memory, structured through age, class, race, gender and sexual preference [and we add here, religion]” (Plummer, 1995: 22).

We have seen in earlier chapters and the introduction how in several ways the image of the convert comes to be associated with and understood in terms which question or are suspicious, even fearful, of the religious and especially Islam, or how they can be drawn into secular understandings. What, as a result, is pushed to the side, avoided, or explained away but is rarely central is the religious aspect of these conversions. The focus of this chapter is to address this neglected area and, as I will argue, shortcoming, which itself is indicative of the socio-cultural context.

Given this background, it is perhaps unsurprising that converts experience a good deal of dissonance in relation to how they themselves experience and feel their sense of identity and the ways in which this is perceived by outsiders; be those family, friends, society more widely, or academic frames in which their religious identity is often contained by conceptualisations of the hybrid and multiple. What emerges as central to this chapter are issues around identity continuity and change and, importantly, the past- and future-oriented dynamics between them. Exploring these forms the central problematic of this chapter. In turn, this generates a tension on the issue of *religiosity*. *Religiosity* as an aspect of religion has largely been neglected, and this neglect is addressed here through consideration of Georg Simmel’s writings on this

concept. It suggests that as an exceptional figure in sociology in this regard, his work provides fruitful ways of understanding the dynamics between continuity and change that emerge in the narratives, and which in turn suggest taking seriously the good faith of the convert and religious identity.

This is particularly salient as it appears that numbers of people converting to Islam in a political and social climate that appears un conducive to such a phenomenon are rising. The increasing presence of Muslims and Islam, whether actual (that is, in demographic terms), cultural (in terms of significance in the social and cultural life of Britain), or imagined (often with undertones of fear), that goes toward fuelling the negative stereotypes also increases the awareness of and opportunities to learn about Islam. A number of my participants talked about previously holding to the broader negativized and stereotyped narrative about Muslims and Islam, and then (in various ways) coming to realise that those stereotypes and perceptions were distortions of Islam. This is one pertinent source of the uneasy relationship between the personal and social.

Along these lines, Angela, who had been Muslim for about 5 years, refers to herself as an “accidental Muslim” given her previous “very hedonistic London lifestyle”. She commented, “Err I always refer to myself as the accidental Muslim because I didn’t see it coming, and I bet no-one else did either”. In fact, her interest in and research on Islam developed as a result of wanting to write “a cracking dissertation” for her MA. Driven by her sense of competitiveness, her topic of tourism development in Libya and Tunisia meant she:

“needed to understand something about Islam. Like really, you know, what does it say about the rights of the traveller and the wayfarer? What does it say about erm care for the Earth, preservation of culture? Err women’s participation in society given they, it’s a service industry and they are a large part of the tourism industry? So, all of these kind of erm questions were purely for my dissertation but all the answers that I got back I thought were very good. I was like ‘oh, well, very good, Islam. So what about this, and what about this, and what about that’.”

Richard, who lives in London and had previously been Catholic, similarly reflects this sentiment when he remarked how, “I wasn’t looking to become a Muslim; far from it”. What Richard is referring to is a period of resistance during which, despite having inwardly recognised that he was becoming a Muslim, his acceptance of this in his social life took longer to fully reconcile given the context and dominant perceptions of Islam and Muslims. Yet the pull of *religiosity* eventually outweighed these other concerns to the point where he is now “proud to be

different". It is these kinds of dynamics and relationships that are at the core of the discussion in this chapter.

As he drifted towards the conclusion of his story, Richard reflected "Y'know: faith is caught, not taught. It's something you feel. And if you don't feel it, you don't believe in it". This apparently simple enough statement bears several pivotal points for this chapter, and the next. The first is its orientation toward *religiosity*, toward the ineffable, the inarticulable aspects of being that orient so much of the life and lives I heard related. The second is the salience and centrality of the emotive, to which particular attention is drawn by the indescribability of aspects of religious experience and sensibility. The third is the matter of faith itself as it relates to these two. What can we say about the relation of practice or performance to faith from this position? These issues will be taken up through discussion of the dynamics between how continuity and change are narrated. Central here will be a move towards congruity as a way of reconciling the apparent contradictoriness of this dynamic in a way that better captures how, through the narrative, a sense of coherence of self is established. The overall aim and argument of this chapter is to move from questioning (as in calling into question) these conversions, and toward their recognition.

Recontextualising continuity

"My story in terms of how it happened. Erm, I was a really... I was a well, [as a] child I was you know really crazy. You know, I always did well in school but I was always really noisy as well. Erm, used to drink a lot, used to do you know a lot of drugs, used to have a lot of fun. I wouldn't say I was wayward - I lost my way so to speak - 'cause I was always y'know doing something productive with my life at the same time Monday to Friday. Erm but I did have a very, very full life in terms of things like that but just never found any kind of fulfilment from it or from any kind of relationship or friendship or anything like that."

This quote is from Simran's narrative. She was a mature student in her mid-twenties and in her final year of a degree in global politics and international relations. She had been raised in a Sikh household, although she herself was not particularly practising. Evident towards the end of the quote is one way in which continuity begins to emerge in the narratives as a result of the reflective and reflexive aspect of biographical identity, seen as a way of providing "order over the flux of the present" (Plummer, 1995: 40). This point can be found in Simran's narrative of having "lost my way" before discovering and subsequently embracing Islam. The important point about how continuity develops is that it is part of how experience, memory and aspiration or desires are structured and given meaning in the present. This present is of course

not a static moment that brings these things to a close but ongoing and evolving. It forms what is probably better thought of as *recontextualised continuity*. This term captures the importance of continuity and takes this seriously as an aspect of subjectivity; that is, it does not take it as a 'problem' to be deconstructed and whose fictiveness is there to be exposed. It also, nevertheless, approaches it as something that can be socially investigated, as something in process, and therefore avoid its reification.

Narrative beginnings

Continuity is an embedded feature of the narrative structure itself, in the plotting of the story. Whether explicitly or implicitly, a sense of continuity is developed as when relating their narratives, converts often return to childhood for their narrative beginnings, even if their conversion took place later in adulthood. In reference to Simran's passage from above, the 'way' becomes recontextualised in that it becomes understood as a path in and to God. Along these lines it is a path that has always been, but worldly life and all its distractions had caused a wandering off the path, to take the perhaps necessary and inevitable scenic route back to finding (rediscovering) the way that was already and had always been there.

This is an example of exactly what is meant by recontextualised continuity. The way exists, it always did, but it was necessary to find it. In fact, this very idea itself, discovery rather than invention or creation, was a common trope, not just in relation to oneself, but also other aspects such as knowledge. This also helps us understand apparent digressions and reflective tangents. Simran, who had grown up nominally Sikh, in fact goes back earlier in her childhood than the passage above, relating how she had been impressed both that her school friend had to go in early to have dinner with her family every day, and also that she could then subsequently go back out to play and stay out later than Simran was allowed to. Far from being simply a tangent, such stories express an early impression of Islam that is given importance and place in the narrative, even as it remains without a formally, logically expressed link. Its emplotment is what gives it its importance as it becomes a sense of Islam having made impressions long before this was consciously and cognitively realised and evaluated.

Continuity and personality

A further and perhaps more personally grounded feature often found here is how significant aspects of personality can be both explicitly and implicitly continuous in the narrative development in the ways in which they are emphasised. For example, Sanjay, whose educational background was in engineering and IT, had been a lover of maths and science in contrast to the arts and humanities from a young age. Throughout his narrative he continually stresses the mathematical and scientific aspects of the Qur'an, especially its compilation and

*tajwid*¹⁰ as being fundamental for its beauty, emotional resonance and truth. Susanne, a life coach and convert of 17 years, although similarly talking about beauty and emotional resonance, as a more artistically inclined personality stresses the aesthetic form of the language, especially calligraphy, as being the captivating factor that led her to discovering the depth and truth of Islam. In this way the deeply felt appeal and emotional, indeed spiritual, resonance is experienced in ways foundational to a sense of one's personality as continuous.

This is an important aspect of how converts experience dissonance and great frustration in, for example, being seen to have become a changed person by family and friends, a mock horror tone in the convert's voice often accompanying the word 'changed' in these situations. Hannah, who was 52 at the time of interview and had been Muslim for 4 years, remarks on certain things she has always done, such as get up early, remarking on the 'coincidence' of its fit with Islam. This early part of the day before other family members had arisen has always been "a beautiful time of day, still is. And in Islam is funnily enough". In very forthright terms Vidya, a 25-year-old lawyer who had been Muslim for 7 years, claimed, "Dude, I've been the same person since before I became Muslim as I am today, and I have had friends over ten years who can attest to that fact". Significant is the deep sense of oneself as she goes on to contrast "I've changed the way I behave" but "I've never changed myself, who I am".

The heart of continuity

The sense of resonance recurs throughout the narratives. At times this is explicitly through usage of the word itself or through other phrases that evoke the same idea. At other times it occurs through gestures, expressions and tones. That is, it emerges through the emotional logic of the narrative as much as the cognitive and linguistically conveyed. In the passage below, Saoirse, who had previously been Roman Catholic until converting to Islam over 11 years ago, conveys this sense of resonance:

"So, basically I was 17 and it was after I found a CD. And the CD had like a picture on it of a mosque. I was like 'wow what's this?' Curious. Stick it in the CD player and what I heard after that I just can't explain. I was quiet for about half an hour. I couldn't speak. I was just like ohhhhh. And I just... my heart just connected to this, and it's like whatever that is, I want that; I want that in my life. [...]

I don't know what the word is I'm looking for, but you know, it was oh yeah it changed my life, but it did completely turn everything around and just from that

¹⁰ Rules governing pronunciation during recitation of the Qur'an.

CD. Just from hearing that CD just changed my life completely... Oh I'm getting emotional now, I'm gonna shut up for a minute. Sorry, I do go on."

The importance of the CD, or more accurately her relating of the time she found and listened to the CD, makes sense only by understanding the emotional story. For Saoirse, discovering and embracing Islam is bound up with hard stories, of tragedy, of relationships, of a life that was doing her no favours and that Islam saved her from. These she remembers throughout the interview as she consistently drifts "miles away" into reflection and "goes on", before recovering herself, apologising and then continuing. Each section of the interview comes to a close in a similar fashion. It is the reflective emotion here that is telling the story, guiding it, dictating the length and expansion of each passage. More than that, it is the emotion which also establishes continuity in the respect being described here. For Saoirse, as for many others, it is the heart which seeks, which connects and finds what it had been missing, what it had always perhaps yearned for, even if the person was unaware of it or ignored it for years as they pursued life in other directions, such as a successful and demanding career. As Simran commented, "I can't say that the books really got me the answer because when you just read and you don't have this faith in your heart, it confuses you even more". It was a recurring theme in many instances across the different narratives that it was the heart which recognizes and remembers. As Katarzyna remarked, "I think for me erm, I do think it's important to understand things. Erm and, and then have knowledge. But unless, unless I understand it in my heart or you know when you say your gut feeling, that sense of peace..."¹¹.

We can also see this in the following passage from Aakash's narrative:

"It's a two-way connection, and what it does, it overrides the brain's thinking. So the fact that we have a human heart and that faith resides in the heart and then this was the thing that was the centrepiece of the spiritual existence of a human being, that was the first big point and then I had to make sense of that."

Aakash, from an upper-class Indian family, narrates himself as very much a cognitive and intellectual subject. He stresses his education at a leading university, his successful and lucrative life working in the financial sector, and his account is full of references to books by prominent intellectuals in business, science and religious thought. Yet, it is faith that comes first here and that he must then, through research, place in a corresponding "intellectual framework". This is a key part of the process that forms the dynamic between *religiosity* and *religion*. For him, as for many, this reconciliation of the heartfelt and the intellectual comes in Islam.

¹¹ see Darwish, 2017, on a similar point in the narratives of Iranian Muslims converting to Christianity.

The distal Divine

These points lead to and have already begun to exemplify a further way in which continuity develops, and for the purposes of this chapter the one which requires the most elaboration: a past-oriented sense of a religious self. This is tied to the fact that conversions are foremost experienced as being personal: “it’s between me and God” as Zaara put it. Nevertheless, as this quote indicates, what we see is that even when deeply personal, that is, when the apparent relation is a relation to oneself, there is still the broader relational aspect of the Divine. Developing on from the recontextualised continuity examples discussed above, this is a crucial aspect of how a religious subjectivity is understood and develops. Moreover, this draws out the value of deploying Simmel’s notion of *religiosity* to understand continuity in this respect.

This religious sense of self is captured in Richard’s remark of “finding a home for it”. Mirroring this is Hannah’s realization that “these [Islam’s] principles are my principles”. Likewise, she speaks about how, on this basis, “it was no effort” as a result of “it” being “of me”. Slightly more flippantly, at least outwardly and apparently, she goes on to remark, “[laughing] I was always a Muslim and no-one told me!” That is, it is congruous with an already existing sense of religious subjectivity; this is the ‘it’ referred to by both. Importantly (and further elaborated in chapter 7), while they may or may not find it difficult for various reasons to relate to Muslims, they relate very deeply and more easily to Islam. It is this sense that continuity establishes through a process of recontextualisation of existing values, attitudes, beliefs and dispositions within an Islamic framework. They are accounting for religion in their lives by going back - tracing its residues and effects in light of the present. This recontextualised continuity can be seen explicitly, for example, in Hannah’s remark that “I was Muslim all along and nobody told me”. The significance of this recontextualisation lies in the fact that it is seen to be the fulfilment and full realisation of a sense of being that had always been there, and invokes *fitrah*. What emerges strongly in the narrative structure with regard to continuity is precisely this ontological sense of being, where that being is understood in terms of *religiosity*. This is when, for example, we find the common rejoinder to their own narrative ruminations “God works in mysterious ways”, and echoes the point above about tangents into seemingly unconnected childhood memories. This then is an important way in which the narrator and the protagonist are ‘fused’ as part of a retrospective teleology. As Brockmeier puts it: “I tell a story about someone who in the course of this story turns out to be *me*, that is, the *I* who has been telling this story all the time” (Brockmeier, 2001: 251, emphasis in original).

This can further be seen at work in this passage from Saiorse when she is describing taking up the headscarf and beginning to cover, and doing so in public:

“Because before I’d y’know gone through a rock phase y’know and all that

business. And I tried to fit in. Not tried to fit in on purpose but y'know, you blend with people, y'know, you follow their sense, like... But when I got the scarf, when I put the scarf on, I felt this is my identity. I love this. It's like when I was younger I used to see women with the face veil on. I'm like wow, y'know. How they can walk around and you don't know what they look like? And for some reason... I was only about 8 or 9, and where we used to live, they used to come to the park. We used to go to the park for a stroll round the corner from where we lived so I was in there nearly every day... And I used to look up and think 'wow'. But I didn't know why I found it so fascinating. And for me, for them, when I started wearing it I was like, now I understand why I used to look at them and think they're just so beautiful, because you don't know who they are and they're confident in themselves. [...]

This is you and if you're happy with that, you just make people think yeah, she's fine. Y'know whatever you can say is not gonna... but it just made me feel yeah. I felt a part of something. I felt complete shall we say; complete – that's the word I'm looking for. I felt yeah, this is me.”

Several points are important in this passage, which reflect the discussion so far. Previous 'phases' were about fitting in with others and their sense. There's nothing strange about this, especially for a teenager, but notably it is following adopting the headscarf that she feels like she understands who *she* is. This leads directly into a recollection of seeing veiled women as a child growing up and always finding it fascinating but being too young to understand why. Now, as an adult, she does understand and narratively impresses this understanding on her younger self. Significant, is the 'something' she feels a part of. Taking this phrase on its own, this would seem to indicate being a Muslim, and now being a visibly recognised and recognisable part of a/the Muslim community as a result of wearing the scarf. However, the way this is emplotted offers a different reading. This sentence is embedded in a passage of self-discovery, of self-recontextualised continuity, and of gaining self-confidence and of being able to walk around in public visible and proud. The more intriguing interpretation of this phrase is that the 'something' is in fact herself, and moreover, herself in Islam. Even when deliberately adopting the visible, there is considerably more going on in relation to identity than merely joining or taking on markers and signifiers. Bectovic rightly argues that “Focussing only on the visual and the ritual narrows down Islamic identity considerably” (2011: 1130). Whereas Bectovic's basis for this stems from studying non-organised Muslims and shifting the focus away from institutional, organised and outwardly recognisable forms of Muslims' belief and practice, the point to emphasise here is that even for the visible and ritualistic, there is a far wider set of processes occurring on a personal level than conformity or a scriptural interpretation of 'right' practice.

Of eggs and atheism

The question arises here about how far such aspects of narratives as these depend on previous religious socialization. It is perhaps easy enough to appreciate how, to quote Adele, for instance, “I guess if you’re somebody who was raised to be God-conscious, [experiencing a theological impasse or having drifted away from religion] does leave a bit of a hole, and that’s when you go on your little search for it again”. Adele had been brought up in a religious family and had previously been a practising Catholic. It might be expected, or at least not unexpected, that people who grew up practising a religious faith before their conversion would be readily able to construct a sense of religious continuity. But what of my participants who explicitly identified as atheist prior to converting to Islam? For them, the construction of such continuity is of course different.

Often, these are stories of being atheist or even anti-theist, which they can even emphasise for contrast. However, despite this important difference in background religious socialization and thought, these stories also bear some similarity. In some ways this relates to the point about continuity in personality above, as we have already seen with Susanne who was previously atheist. However, rather than being an aspect of personality through which the religious resonates, it acquires a distinctive religious interpretation itself. For these participants, their tales of seeking answers to questions and doubts about life, purpose and being, of emptiness that needed filling, are embedded in philosophical yearnings. Katarzyna, for example, talked about meditation and then beginning to visit a Sufi group in London to meditate with them: “you just connect through your heart with erm love. In that case for me, it was the universe because I still didn’t believe in God really, erm but it was just connecting with a higher source”. Initially detached from the overtly theological as in this case, these nonetheless come to be drawn into a religious orbit.

Lewis, who was 22 and worked in social research, recounts how reading and debating philosophy and social theory with his family and through his undergraduate studies left him “so dissatisfied with the fact that everything had a gaping hole in its logic and it was... it didn’t make any practical sense”. In fact, Lewis later on, when talking about going to pronounce the *shahada*, remarks how he did not tell his family to begin with because he “decided to be careful and a bit more slow about it ‘cause it’s something that’s quite big” and that “people think it’s a dangerous er philosophy/religion”. What is evident in this last phrase is how what might previously have been described in more secular philosophical terms now takes a distinctly religious or spiritual characterisation as the lines become narrated in fuzzier terms. He goes on to recall a “poignant memory” from his childhood of “getting down on my knees and praying in the Christian sense”, helping to establish a longer essence of connection with something greater than himself and the material or physical world. Whereas it is not

uncommon for secular atheists to talk about a 'spiritual phase' when they were younger and experimenting, in this and similar aspects in other narratives it is atheism that is a 'phase', merely an alleyway on the path to Islam.

We can see this quite clearly in a story Rosie, who had not had a religious upbringing, tells about beginning to realise "who she is" and what she believes:

"And I was with my boyfriend at the time and we were on a train going somewhere and he was telling me about, he was a mathematician, and he was telling me about eggs; a very strange conversation but it stuck in my head (...) he was really into the fact that mathematics was elegant and it's amazing and isn't that cool, and all of that... He said to me once, 'Do you know why eggs are shaped the way they are; as opposed to being spherical they are egg shaped?' And I said, 'No idea. You tell me.' And he said, 'It's because if one of them rolls out of the nest, it won't just roll away as it would if it was spherical, it rolls in an arc back to the nest.' And I thought 'Ooh, that's really clever, isn't it?' And I remember he really took huge offence to the fact that I had said '*that's clever*' because I had implied it was a design. And I remember he said 'what do you mean that's clever?' And I was like, 'it's quite clever that they are designed like that' - and I even then said *they are designed like that*. And it got worse. And he was like, 'What do you mean that they are *designed* like that? They evolved like that.' And I remember I said 'Have you ever seen a fossil of a spherical egg?' (...) And I think that was the only time that we had ever had an argument actually, so it was quite amusing. But that conversation sort of stuck in my head because I started thinking, you know, okay obviously not an atheist, just simple as, I am not an atheist. I can't be if I think things like this (...) So then I said to him 'Okay, I am not an atheist: I had better figure out what I *am* then.'"

At the time of this story Rosie was living abroad, identified as atheist, and also talked about how she would consistently question a Muslim friend of hers in order to outsmart and out-argue her on religion, feminism and other topics. Following the realisation narrated in the story above, and some other experimenting and searching, her questions began to change from trying to "debunk everything [her friend] believe[d] in" to asking about what she believed in with an open curiosity.

We might see Rosie's story of the egg as an analogy of the discussion so far as it pertains to *religiosity*. Converts are, having been brought up outside of Islam, returning to Islam and this sense of being. In all of these examples of how continuity emerges in and is established by the narratives, one aspect remains clearly central and consistent: the religious.

We have already noted the importance of the concept of *fitrah* in relation to continuity and a sense of religious being and that is evident here. Its relation to *religiosity* further demonstrates the salience of bringing theological principles into conversation with sociological investigation. Moreover, even where revert was preferred and the general term used to capture this sense, the idea of 'New Muslim' was also theologically present as a number of people emphasized the 'new born' status of being a convert as previous sins did not count towards one's accumulation. Sanjay, for instance, who had been Muslim for 12 years, both emphasizes his 20 – 25-year journey and also refers at one point to being "brand new in Islam. Yeah, I was only about a year old at that stage". Yet, 'New Muslim' might also be shunned sociologically when it is used against claims of *religiosity* and *being* Muslim in such a way as to socially exclude and limit their voices and participation. There are overlapping and overlaying temporalities of continuity and change, which, significantly, may also mark theological and sociological overlaps. This itself relates to the pertinence of a 'theological ear' in approaching an understanding of the personal aspect of the narratives and the work they are doing. While the issue of social belonging and exclusion along these lines will be elaborated in the following chapter, the following section turns to the theological aspects more directly, and my participants' more direct invocations of them.

Non-storied stories: the explainer, the explainee and the explained

Investigating "daily religious experiences" Bender found that the people she was speaking to were in fact emphasising "religious experience" (2007: 203, emphases in original). There is a parallel relevant here; my participants consistently and continually emphasised religious reflection and explanation. In this way certain theological and scriptural considerations stem from the empirical data rather than being an imposition on it (cf McGuire, 2008), and it is from here that we can start to explore the dynamic. A further aspect of continuity that emerged from the narratives relevant here is their insistence on basing their belief and practice first and foremost on the Qur'an (as well as on sunna and hadith), itself noted for continuity as being unchanged since first put down and arranged (although on the factitude of this see Ahmed, 1992). Here there was often an emphasis on 'seeing it in the Qur'an' before accepting any particular position. If this sounds simplistic, it is because it perhaps is. But it serves to highlight the importance of this aspect of continuity and their foregrounding of the Divine and religious against the worldly and cultural.

Ruminations and explanations on points of Islamic theology feature heavily in the narratives, and in a number of ways. One significant way is contrasting positions in other religions, particularly those traditions they were brought up in, with Islam. Another way, and more directly pertinent here, is that explanations and justifications are prominent features across the narratives, both in the form mentioned in the previous sentence as well as more generally. This

itself is part of a narrative construction as previous attitudes, feelings and interpretations become drawn into an Islamic framework; that is, how *religiosity* becomes translated into the forms of *religion*. They emerge as a narrative feature, not merely thematic, and as such suggest that such explanations and reflections are not separable from the life as lived. That is, they cannot be separated from the stories of happenings in daily life, whether exceptional or routine, trivial and banal. In other words, there is no clean separation between thought, belief and practice, they are mutually reinforcing.

An aspect of these direct and explicit theological ruminations may of course be seen to represent my position as an 'outsider' on the basis of being non-Muslim. At numerous times theological terminology in Arabic was used to explain points, describe feelings and so on. Some used this language either with the assumption that I understood, or perhaps without worrying whether I did or not. Others paused to check if they should translate; and at times when I said that it was unnecessary, did anyway. This bore similarity with remarks made by a few regarding aspects of the historical development of Islam. They might either pause to ask if I needed a particular reference or event explained or make an aside that they were sure I knew it already from my research, and then proceed to explain it anyway. Alternatively, they might rattle through some assuming I was following, or perhaps not caring either way. Undoubtedly, I am positioned and perceived in particular and various ways by the participants, and the narrative can't but reflect that. All these instances and variations speak of how both I and my knowledge were perceived and served to mediate aspects of the account and how it was told. Nevertheless, there are two compelling alternative, or at the very least additional, reasons for these kinds of explanation which warrant reflection, not least because of their narrative importance.

That these explanations are given, and at times at length, may reflect the broader social need of these. On the one hand this can be seen to reflect the decline in the position of religion in society and of the Christian background of Britain in spite of this decline. There is a threefold need of justification on the part of the convert here. The first is a felt need to justify religious belief itself in this context. The second is to justify Islam as part of and compatible with Britain. This would involve at times pointing to similarities between Islam and Christianity even when simultaneously highlighting differences. This itself is significant as it serves to emphasise that difference itself is not a problem: common ground can still be found and, particularly if the religious is felt to be under threat from secularism more generally, different faiths can be friends in difference. The third is to justify and explain Islam against the social and cultural context which so often misrepresents it. Here, the opportunity to tell their story to a sympathetic outsider provides an obvious motivation.

However, it also, I suggest, is a more embedded feature of the narrative development. It is precisely because of this context that it becomes necessary not just for outsiders but at least as importantly for themselves also. It is interesting here to recall that many of my participants held negativised views of Islam and Muslims prior to their learning more about Islam as part of the conversion journey (also Zebiri, 2008) and experienced a 'period of resistance', as we saw with Richard.

Such narrative features as theological explanations and justifications, therefore, are not merely representative of my 'outsider' status in this regard. They also do narrative work more immediately concerned with the sense of personal journey that the narrative itself represents. What I want to suggest here is that these explanations are a centrally important part of the emotional journey and of the emotional logic of the narrative as told and as event. For instance, Zaara explains how she would never be one wife of two, three or four and how her husband "knows better" than to suggest such a situation, although it appears that this has never been an issue between them. Yet it features as an important part of her own negotiations of stereotypes on this level and feelings of comfort and confidence as a woman and wife in Islam.

On the surface of it Stephen seems to routinely drift into a fairly staid and abstract explanation of certain points as matters of principle. He presents a discussion of issues such as changing your name or not upon conversion and the role of trials in faith in a way which can sound or read like him laying out some of these key features of what Islam is about; a kind of beginner's guide almost. As this kept recurring I at times in the interview thought about how to get him back to the story. What emerges as the narrative progresses, nevertheless, is that far from being staid, these abstract explanations in significant ways are his narrative. In important ways they are his reflections, negotiations and experiences; and they are *his* reflections, negotiations and experiences. There is undoubtedly a good amount of narrative editing going on, but these apparently abstract points come to be, in significant ways, his story. He has gone through these things and the abstract now represents his surface story, but a surface that belies the emotional and reflective content it draws on. The driftings off into explanations are not merely explanations for the sake of the listener but are there for their own sake. Their own here is meant in a twofold sense. Firstly, for the sake of the narrative itself – without them the narrative would lose coherence and integrity. Secondly, for the sake of the individual teller themselves. They go some way towards mapping the individual's negotiations and choices through reasonings and rationales, cognitive and felt, through the entanglement of their personally held thoughts and feelings and the social milieu, which are inextricably and mutually embedded. They are representative of the process and journey of narrative self-construction and its ongoing character. Moreover, they are part of a self-making which does and can only take place in a particular context, in this case one in which such explanations,

and as well-formed and articulated ones as possible, are necessary to shield or defend oneself from accusations and suspicions.

It is in this light also that we can understand why, for example, a number of participants hid their conversion from friends and family initially, and in Richard's case for three years. This tactic allows the self to develop to a point of confidence at which anticipated questionings and reactions can be managed in a way that does not so forcefully jeopardise the evolving sense of subjectivity as Muslim. This again alerts us to the uneasy relationship between continuity and change and the personal and the social in these narratives. It is often these stages when this confidence and knowledge is very much nascent that is the hardest. It is very often a time of being questioned about all manner of aspects of Islam, including current political events, and which can cause great unease for the individual near the beginning of a very personal and spiritual journey. There is variance here. Some convert before really beginning to learn in a more formal, bookish sense that enables them to respond to various interlocutors in daily life. Others do not convert until they have learnt in this way to feel sufficiently comfortable in the faith, and that it is for (or of) them. This variance itself is deeply personal. Whichever way round they do it, this unease interlocks these aspects of continuity and change and the personal and the social.

In the ways described so far converts narrate a deep sense of continuity as part of the self- and meaning-making process of religious identity. It is now time to turn to how change emerges in relation to continuity.

Continuity and change: Congruity as reconciling

An initial and immediately obvious sense of change is that suggested by the subject of conversion itself, that is by its Latin etymology discussed in chapter 3. This must be understood in the context of contemporary secular Britain and the declining centrality of religion and religious belief. Here Britain, and Christianity, are often seen by my participants as spiritually empty. Christian practice is seen as merely ritualistic and thus as devoid of substance, or, as Katarzyna put it, "it was [for me] more of a Santa Claus thing, you know. You just believe because other people do". Moreover, this is also the case of Hinduism and Sikhism (see also Iyadurai, 2011), and in fact atheism.

This sense of spiritual emptiness might be on a personal level, as when Adele recounts how she "felt like when I had prayed in Catholicism, I never felt like I had really been doing anything. I felt like I'm having a conversation with myself and going crazy". Likewise, Gayle, who was nominally Christian prior to conversion, reflects a sense of self-hypocrisy and significantly hypocrisy in front of God when she says, "And I thought, no hang on a minute I can't do this. I can lie to somebody if I need to, but I cannot get on my hands and knees and say to God 'I

believe in God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost' in church praying when I know and He knows I don't believe it".

This can also be scaled up in a wider social sense in which Christianity, Hinduism and so on themselves, or at least how many Christians, Hindus etc. practise their faith, is perceived to be spiritually empty in a similar way. As Gayle goes on to say, "And that was, that was the sticking point, that hypocrisy of the Christians I had met, err some of them. And it, particularly in the church I was in, had turned me off, that's true". Significantly, this also forms a basis of criticism directed at many born Muslims, where the habit and routine aspect of practising cultural tradition is contrasted with the deeply religious content of Islam. The change here is necessitated by their sense of a religious self embedded in continuity as discussed above: if they do not change, they cannot be/become who they are. This is apparently paradoxical, but investigating this dynamic between continuity and change and the religious aspect can in fact unravel this apparent paradox. What is significant here is how this hollowness is recounted as a disjuncture between their inner and outer lives, and that could only be brought into conjuncture through a significant change.

Resonance at conjunctures of past and future

We can begin to see the relationship between continuity and change often emerging in moments suffused with standstill, deep emotional resonance. Hannah, for example, who has three children of her own and has been a foster carer for over 20 years, looking after just shy of a hundred young people, including many asylum seekers, recounts what she referred to as the '*inshallah* moment'. The '*inshallah* moment' referred to the time she first heard someone say *inshallah*, in light of terrible circumstances, and began to understand a sense of profundity in relation to its meaning. In recalling this instance, she was visibly experiencing this memory and its present telling in an embodied sense. The embodied emotion she was experiencing may be a present construction of the past state (Young, 2000), but it was deeply felt and no less powerful for this. Moreover, it was expressed not merely in words and tone, but through accompanying movements without which the telling would be incomplete. Likewise, this resonance can be felt when Sanjay remarks that following his friend quoting a passage from the Qur'an where it says that God would not put a burden upon him that he couldn't handle, "I walked upstairs and I went like that on my desk [puts elbows on the table and rests head in hands looking down]. I was doing some work on the computer and I just looked at the screen, looked at the screen". In this sense the telling of the experience is intimately linked with experiencing it, or at least reexperiencing it from the position of the present.

This is also reflected in the emplotment of the narrative and in narrative time. Adele, for example, the least loquacious of my participants, brought her "very short snippet of the story"

having “missed out a lot” to a close after just two and a half minutes. Nevertheless, as we made our way back through the points emerging from that initial ‘snippet’, an especially salient part was a particular conversation she had had with a Muslim colleague about marriage rights of women in Islam, which contrasted with her experiences as a Catholic. Although not more than a few exchanged sentences, this conversation is both one of these moments of stand-still resonance as part of the narrated event (the past event being narrated) and also as part of the narrative event (the event of the telling of the narrative itself). It is something that she refers to as gaining its present significance for the narrated event following reflection. Furthermore, its presence as such in the narrative event both carries the emotional weight in its telling as well as being the first chunk, and one of only a couple during the entire interview, to extend to two and a half minutes on its own following the opening. That this story of such a short conversation should have this place in the narrative time of the narrative as a whole, is suggestive of its importance in this regard.

These moments, with their deep resonance, represent the meeting point, the conjuncture, in the narrative. It might be said that from these the overlapping temporality in the narratives stems. These kinds of realisations express the meeting points and imbricated-ness that can often seem contradictory and ambiguous, but which are experienced as congruous. Congruity here, rather than continuity, contains the senses of both continuity and change and their dynamics, including contradiction and ambivalence, while at the same time registering how these need not necessarily be experienced as problematic. That is, that it can lead us towards a reconceptualization of the subject, which pertains towards the arguments for recognition.

Rosie captures these aspects when she says:

“And erm it was just sort of from there it just grew that I was thinking ‘yeah, this is it, this is what I want to be, this is who I am. And it wasn’t that I felt I needed to change, it was sort of that I sort of realised that yeah, this is how it is: this is what I’ve been looking for. And I felt like it is me and not that I had found something that I needed to alter for. I did need to make changes obviously because I had been doing things that were not going to be compatible. Erm, but it was, it just felt very natural in that way.”

A significant way in which change emerges, therefore, is directly related to continuity. Whereas it was noted that continuity emerges as a past-oriented form of being oneself, change emerges in relation to this as a future-oriented form of constantly becoming oneself in relation to forms of religion. This is bound up in narratives of personal development, of becoming better, of improving oneself and, by so doing, coming closer to God. This provides often the strength to deal with difficult experiences. As Simran said, “At the end of the day it causes problems socially, it causes problems with your family, it causes problems with my dress,

it causes problems in terms of relationships. Erm, you name it. The only reason I'm happy to do it and the only reason that these experiences turn into happy things is because of the end goal. So, essentially if you don't believe in that end goal, that's it. So that's why I call it a fight". It is often also through this process of becoming that 'the feeling' not experienced when first encountering the Qur'an or pronouncing the *shahada* emerges.

What is also noticeable about these moments is that, although they may later come to be associated with the Qur'an, sayings of the prophet Muhammad or theological principles, they are for the most part not related to formalised ritual aspects of Islam. These narrated events are in fact very rarely related to the Qur'an, in the direct sense of when they began reading it, or to the *shahada*. They are mostly embedded in a particular personal moment, the significance of which is unnoticed and unappreciated by others, rather than in any rite or more formal process (cf. Al-Qwidi, 2002). In fact, many report feeling nothing, or at least nothing in particular, and certainly not a deep and direct connection with the divine, upon pronouncing the *shahada*. This is at least partly related to the previous discussion about having already accepted Islam in their hearts. As Kate, who had been Catholic and was the youngest of my participants at 18, expressed it, and in contrast to some convert stories she had heard or read about, "I didn't feel anything really. I thought that like oh I'll feel like a new person. But I was like, I'm the same person. So yeah, I just felt nothing at all. I didn't feel like a new person like I thought I would". A number of people in fact recounted having felt like they had actually become Muslim prior to their *shahada* having accepted Islam in their hearts in a more private moment. For Zaara, for instance, this came while she was sitting in her local library reading.

The *shahada*, then, although marking the official and ritual passage into Islam is neither the beginning, and nor is it the end, of conversion to Islam. From a narrative perspective Rosie provides an interesting example of this. As the narrative develops it is apparent that she considers she has been a Muslim for 20 years, having accepted Islam at a point prior to her *shahada* and therefore, for her, meaning the *shahada* was a significant ritual but not the key moment. However, when I was going through my information sheet at the end of the interview, where one of the direct questions is 'How long since you converted?', she responded 19 years, dating it to her *shahada*. This highlights quite nicely a difference between life as narrated and direct responses to direct questions.

Integrity of congruity

There is a parallel here with regard to the Qur'an also. Initially it made little sense to most and required sustained learning to begin to be able to approach, understand, and appreciate – a process which is necessarily incomplete. Richard conveys this, albeit in franker and blunter terms than most: "So, I'd got this copy of the Qur'an – didn't make any sense to me. I hear

some people ‘Oh, I read it and this light went off’. Bollocks. It doesn’t work like that – it doesn’t make sense. Most people are like ‘huh?’, need it explained to them”. It is worth briefly noting that I did not find people with such ‘light bulb’ moments amongst my participants, and that this is one example of characters appearing in the narrative which represent a contrast between the narrator thereby helping to establish certain positions for the narrator.

Furthermore, how this congruity of self through a recontextualised continuity is established also turns out to be a key way in which narrative integrity is established. Freeman and Brockmeier use the term narrative integrity to point to the ethical dimension of identity narratives. The aspect of narrative integrity that concerns us here is “the coherence and depth of one’s ethical commitments, as evidenced by the shape of one’s life” (2001: 76) and is “part and parcel of the very project of giving sensible meaning to experience” (ibid: 95). These conjunctural moments represent the process of “the conceptual space where autobiographical identity and the meaning of the good life meet” (ibid: 97). From them the narrative flows backwards in the ways described previously, and also forwards. This manifests through the realization of God’s divine presence and in contrast to those contextual restrictions on such a vision of themselves as subjects and also of the meaning of the good life.

Again, a ‘theological ear’ helps here. The concept of *fitrah* and the lack of direct equivalent does not suggest that all souls are Muslim and therefore conversion is not necessary. It is the dynamics here that are significant to understanding the assertions of a) already becoming oneself in relation to what one already is, b) becoming oneself at the moment of accepting Islam and, as congruous with this, c) the continual and renewed sense of faith, piety and becoming more in relation to God developed through practice and future-oriented development. This becomes crucially important to understanding the continual and renewed sense of faith and piety developed through practice as it is these dynamics that make coherent and congruous the assertions of both already becoming oneself in relation to what one already is at the moment of accepting Islam, and becoming more in relation to God continually through practice. That is that one both is Muslim and at the same time is constantly becoming Muslim through developing an Islamic teleological subjecthood. Tariq Ramadan (highlighted consistently as a key influence) describes it thus: “all of us are required to return to ourselves and to rediscover the original breath, to revive it and confirm it” (Ramadan, 2004: 17). This again attests to the dynamics between *religiosity* and *religion* as being significant.

Religiosity, congruity and habitus

An emphasis on the constitutive role of practice as part of subjecthood has led some to focus on habitus and it is worth here seeing how this discussion so far relates. Habitus in the Bourdieusian sense has been used specifically with reference to converts to Islam in order to

point to how their existing religious socialization influences their Islamic practice and understanding.

In this way, for example, a Catholic habitus is seen to shape and to match the form of Islam the convert practices, which is therefore seen as a continuation of this habitus (Shanneik, 2011; also Rasmussen, 2017). Rather than seeing the continuation in habitus between previous religious socialization and Islam, Moosavi, as was discussed in chapter 4, focuses on how converts seek to cultivate an Islamic habitus and argues that: “Muslim converts respond to the suspicion about their authenticity by performing as authentic Muslims and displaying their Muslimness” (2012: 126). Here then, rather than being an explanatory factor of behaviour and disposition as a result of unconscious processes resulting from socialization, habitus becomes a site of deliberate and tactical performance where the explanatory factor is found in the goal of acceptance by and belonging to a specific community or to a specific body of people.

From my own sample, converts who perform in such ways and for such purposes as Moosavi indicates feature as characters in my participants’ narratives, sometimes one of these characters being themselves in the past. This of course points directly at possibly the most obvious form of change: lifestyle changes. A fuller discussion of the empirical considerations of practice and lifestyle changes, which provoked Moosavi’s analysis, are expanded in chapter 7. For more immediate purposes, however, it is enough to point out how, following the discussion above, a focus on performing Islam for the benefit of passing tests of authenticity, often seen as cultural rather than religious by my participants, misses the profound relation of practice, both those formally recognisable as ritualistic and those which appear apparently more secular, with the processes of being and becoming that form the central discussion in this chapter. The divine in this rendering is not taken into account. The result is that it becomes an unnecessarily sociologically reductive conception of these converts as Islamic subjects when the forms and character of their practice are explained as simply a relation between the convert and born Muslims. A point that continually emerges in the narratives being considered here is an emphasis on the meaning of ‘the rules’ and not merely socialization into adhering to a prescriptive set of rules. The distinction between inner belief and outer practice dimensions to *religiosity* are, however heuristically useful for analysis, not reflective of religious experience as the two do not exist exclusively from each other (Jensen, 2008).

Mahmood (2005), while also employing habitus, does so from a perspective that is more useful to the understanding being developed here. Mahmood draws on the older Aristotelian tradition rather than that from Bourdieu. In this rendering of the term, “moral cultivation implies a quality that is acquired through human industry, assiduous practice, and discipline, such that it becomes a permanent feature of a person’s character” (2005: 136). Crucially, this has a

distinct ethical dimension: to return to the source, “virtue of character (*ēthos*) is a result of habituation (*ethos*). From this it is clear that none of the virtues of character arises in us by nature” (Aristotle, 2004: 23). It is through the right practices and effort, repeating and achieving an Islamic subjecthood with a future-oriented becoming, that the subject continually becomes more fully herself or himself. (For a similar but differently framed discussion, see Topal, 2017. Her line of discussion focuses on women in Turkey and follows Foucault and his ‘technologies of the self’ for piety as becoming.) To put it another way, the internalisation of constraints creates freedom in relation to how they lead to God (Bowker, 2015).

What is also significant, however, as it emerges in the dynamics between continuity and change of this sort in the narratives, is that mere practice is not sufficient but requires the right intention. This right intention is consistently and persistently emphasised by my participants and is central to an ethical sense of the self. Crucially, the right intention is directly connected to the heart as it is the heart primarily that recognises God. Lewis, for example, talked about being turned ‘inside-out’. He described what he meant by how he was “looking everywhere but nowhere, really cheesy. I was looking everywhere but I guess not really with my heart. I wasn’t really looking for anything with the right intention, with... When I came to Islam I kind of, I started... I stopped looking with my eyes and hearing with my ears and just reading, reading and reading; I started to open my heart and look at stuff”.

Following this we can extend the discussion of and insight into thinking about the link between inner and outer through habitus. Mahmood notes the influence of Aristotle on early Islamic thinkers, noting in particular Ibn Khaldun. She notes a parallel between Aristotle’s discussion of cultivating habit and Khaldun’s own understanding. She quotes a passage from *The Muqaddimah* in which Khaldun states: “A habit is a firmly rooted quality acquired by doing a certain action and repeating it time after time, until the form of that action is firmly fixed” (1958: 346). Notably, especially in relation to Mahmood’s well-known analogy of a pianist, this passage appears in reference to developing craftsmanship. However, Khaldun uses the term *fikr* (thinking ability), which corresponds closely to ‘*ʿaql*’, one of the functions of which is the ability to accept divine revelation (Ahmad, 2003: 22). A more germane reference, therefore, can be found when Khaldun discusses knowledge, not least because knowledge and learning are core for converts’ (ongoing) journeys:

“It is clear that the object of all (religious) obligations is the acquisition of a habit firmly rooted in the soul, from which a necessary knowledge results for the soul. It is the (recognition of the) oneness of God which is the (principal) article of faith and the thing through which happiness is attained... The highest degree [of faith] is the acquisition, from the belief of the heart and the

resulting actions, of a quality that has complete control over the heart.” (2015: 352)

This is instructive as while, as Mahmood notes, the appeal of the notion of *habitus* lies in “its emphasis on human activity and deliberation, rather than divine grace or divine will, as determinants of moral conduct”, it leaves open the space for the divine in three important ways: first, as agential force, that is, as willing and as working in ‘mysterious ways’; secondly, as a distal source for one’s identity, which is indispensable to the aspect of essential being; and also thirdly, by virtue of being a distal source, as a source and force as reachable *in potentia*. That is, as something to be worked towards in this life in the awareness of the eternal that both is and awaits, which itself is essential to the flow of becoming undertaken. It is in this sense that “The inability to perceive is perception” (Khaldun, 2015: 351). As Khaldun elaborates: “Thus, (the recognition of the) oneness of God is identical with inability to perceive the causes and the ways in which they exercise their influence, and with reliance in this respect upon the Creator of the causes who comprises them” (2015: 351). For Khaldun, the cultivation of habit occurs within a divine framework. It is a feature of many narratives that the narrative itself returns to God routinely between the different phases of the telling.

What’s important here is not a reading of Khaldun, he wasn’t mentioned by any participants so how familiar any one of them is with him is unknown and neither here nor there. Rather, the, at least apparently, more straightforward causality of practice = religious subjectivity is given an added twist. While “action does not issue forth from natural feelings but creates them” (Mahmood, 2001: 214), as part of change and becoming, continuity as it is developed through the narratives does leave a space for *religiosity*, which finds its (rightful) home in this very (worldly) process of practices. The right intention can only stem from this sense of *religiosity*. This is because practices, of whatever form – whether formally recognised religious ritualistic practices such as praying or simpler (supposedly secular) acts of kindness towards others – must be performed not out of mere habit or duty, or for show, but must emanate from a love of and desire to please God. Topal (2017) in fact notes this dual emphasis, on both reason and practices, in the Qur’an. Acts, along these lines, are seen as “valid only if and when it is based on the *niyya* (intent) of the giver, thereby making it a voluntary contribution for the sake of Allah” (Ahmad I, 2017: 45). Such a view of *habitus* also requires us to assess with greater nuance the position common in everyday approaches which similarly emphasise that “religion-as-lived is based more on such religious practices than on religious ideas or belief” (McGuire, 2008: 15).

Significantly, even when the attraction to Islam may stem from contact with Muslims and their attitudes and behaviour, it is when there is a ‘genuine’ niceness, understood as stemming from

religiosity, rather than niceness grounded in social and cultural norms, that it is given such depth and is something they wish to aspire to cultivate.

It is also significant to note here how for many the inscrutable 'feeling' which we have already noted did not come at the formal moment of becoming a Muslim, pronouncing the *shahada*, but more often through prayer. Vidya remarked how "when I bowed down to pray, that day something inside of me connected with Islam and that connection has never left me... I know that I was guided, and that's how I feel - I was guided by God to being a Muslim". Adele and Richard both talk about how witnessing prayer had been what first left a deep impression on them and resonated with them. This would then become connected with intention and practice. It is always gradual as something worked on, constantly aspirational (whether or not it accompanies a negativising view of the present), and an always and inevitably incomplete state, at times joyous, at times disciplining, when the inside and outside aspects of *I* begin to fuse.

Ontological responsibility

A further aspect that emerges here and is related to the ethical is a sense of responsibility as a core aspect of this process. There is a strong identarian and feeling or emotion management (Hochschild, 2012) aspect of representation as a form of *da'wah*: being a good example that others see, despite how frustrating this can at times be. Rosie relates a story about her friend when talking about Muslims being "under the microscope":

"I had a friend once and she said to me, 'you know I can't even have a bad day'. She said, 'since I started wearing hijab, I can't have a bad day. I can't be in a pissy mood. I can't flip off somebody who has just cut me off while I am driving because then it's like 'Muslims do this', you know. 'Muslims are in a bad mood'. She's like 'seriously I feel like I just always have to be smiling because I have to be an ambassador'. And I said to her 'But you don't'. And she's like, 'I know I don't. You know I don't. But they think I do, and that's the problem'."

There is of course a strong sense of right performance here, and that linked to the particular social context in which they live in Britain. Significant, however, is how this relates to a lifestyle understanding and approach to *da'wah* (Poston, 1992) where the sense of responsibility becomes an ontological responsibility. Murad (1998) argues that the concept of *da'wah* is not a one-time event or even a multi-event concept, but rather a continual striving that begins first and foremost directed at oneself and is, following this, an integral part of oneself and of being and becoming Muslim perpetually, and must therefore begin at the micro-level.

We can see this ontological responsibility illustrated when Vidya says, in recounting her *shahada* and going out for a meal afterwards:

“At that point you are happy and you’re relieved and you, you know you feel... I felt very spiritually at ease. But then I realised, whoa I’m a Muslim, like I have to get my shit together.... It’s time to focus and get it right. It’s kinda like you know how, I’m not sure if you’ve experienced this or if anyone’s kinda helped you understand this, but you kinda feel like it’s... It’s not like a rebirth but revert means you reverted back to your original state, that means that everything in between wasn’t really who you were; it was kinda more like a superficial version, and so that’s all gone now. So that’s kinda how I felt and that’s why it was daunting. I’m like finally here in reality, I’ve gotta be real, I’ve gotta live my life now, this is my only chance, y’know.”

What emerges as significant in passages such as this one is the strong sense of responsibility toward oneself. Having discovered the ‘Truth’, one no longer has any excuses for not being oneself, and must, as Vidya colloquially but very much to the point put it, get one’s shit together. While some of the dynamics of this will be explored further in the next chapter, we can note here the strength of this idea in how converts construct their sense of subjectivity.

Religiosity and the inside outside

A final way in which change emerges is through being seen (anew) by others. In the narratives, the process of being ‘re-ethnicized’ as a result of becoming Muslim emerges (unsurprisingly) most strongly, and with most frustration and consternation, in relation to family and the local surroundings in which they live their everyday lives. This is also where locality emerges very prominently and emotively as the streets, bus journeys, shops, cafés and so on that are so familiar change. The way they feel in them and experience them changes, the reactions of other people towards them changes, often palpably. This is most keenly felt by female converts who adopt the headscarf and are thus visibly Muslim. One of my participants, for example, at the most poignant part of her interview, relates a story of being stared at and whispered about on a bus journey in her home town after adopting the hijab. Visibly upset and frustrated she describes the feeling of being seen as not the same person, being seen to be personality-less, against feeling still is the same person despite now being Muslim.

These types of instances point to this often-uneasy relationship between continuity and change, and between the personal and the social. Moreover, this also highlights the relationship between how this is managed on a personal level in a way that establishes congruity, in contrast with being seen more exclusively through the lens of change by others. Of course, for outsiders they have visibly changed - she now wears hijab and as a result has become

different. Yet converts, experiencing themselves from the inside in ways others do not and cannot, can be deeply frustrated by such a one-dimensional view of who they are and feel themselves to be. This is important because by establishing a sense of congruity in the ways described above, they are not in so doing denying change, but rather it highlights how these are imbricated and located in the centrality of *religiosity*.

Mixing Motifs

A further trend in the literature relevant to the discussion so far is the emphasis on the 'rational' and 'intellectual' bases of conversions. It has been suggested that "intellectual conversion narratives... appear to be the preferred conversion narrative among Muslims in the West" (Inloes & Takim, 2014: 6). These aspects were likewise present in the narratives informing this study, where Islam's rational, logical and scientific character was commonly stressed. Gayle remarked, for example, that "... when I came to Islam I found logic. In fact I would go so far as to say if you hear something about Islam which does not appear logical to you, it's because you haven't actually understood it properly". As we saw with Aakash, "the framework of Islam" had to be investigated and negotiated as part of the gradual process of coming to Islam. It was the reconciliation provided by 'aqī that led them to Islam (see also Armstrong, 2018). In many ways this might be understood to reflect the wider context where an emphasis is placed on rationality and scientific modes of thinking. Nevertheless, the result of this has been, to put it in the language of motifs (Lofland & Skonovd, 1981), to over-emphasise the cognitive in contrast to the mystical to the point where they are seen as distinct and incompatible; that one is dominant over the other.

This is not to suggest that these are consequently irrational conversions, or even that we need to balance rationality with irrationality in order to combat the latter's supposed anachronism, but precisely to point to the flaw in these distinctions as necessary in the primary instance, and again to point to the need to centralise the religious aspect for understanding the subjectivities here. In fact, Azari and Birnbacher, offering an inter-disciplinary study drawing together neuroscience and religious studies, have argued that "religious experience emerges as 'thinking that feels like something'" (2004: 915). There is no religious emotion or experience that can be isolated and called religious and that is distinct from 'thinking'. That is, neither emotion nor cognition on their own capture religious experience, yet clearly for some, some emotions and experiences are imbued with a religious quality that distinguishes them from other emotions and experiences and forms the basis of identity and orients much of life (see also Davies, 2011). As we have seen in reference to Sanjay, and he was far from alone, his scientific approach and understanding expressed through his love of maths that he brought to bear in his passion for the Qur'an, formed the basis of his religious and emotional resonance. This has also been suggested by the discussions in which 'aqī was significant. We can thus

bypass rather sterile characterizations that might seek to oppose or disconnect the mystical and the rational.

Chapter Summary: Reassessing religious identity

“I feel like my childhood, because it was another country, already felt like a dream anyway. But even more so in my adolescence itself just feels like, it feels like a movie to me when I play it back in my mind. It doesn’t feel like it was reality. It feels like who I am today is who I’ve always been.”

This quote from Vidya with her evocative characterization of life and self before conversion being another country and dream-like whilst simultaneously feeling like who she is today, in some essential sense, is the same as who she has always been, captures some of the overlapping complexities of the continuity-change problematic discussed in this chapter.

A series of complex issues arise from consideration of how continuity and change are narrated, where personal and social issues intermingle in an often-uneasy relationship with religious affiliation. This chapter has argued that as far as these converts are understood purely in relation to cultural and social facets of such religious affiliation, it risks a reductionism that feeds into fragmented and competing claims around identity categories, notably national, ethnic and religious affiliation. Viswanathan’s (1998) argument outlined at the beginning of the introduction about conversion’s unsettling potential was directed at ideas of fixed, unalterable identities. Here that position is expressed through the dynamics of change. It is also, nevertheless, through the dynamics of continuity given the added inflection of unsettling ideas of the fluid and multiple that as such would flatten identity. An over-emphasis on change has been repeatedly challenged and shown to not reflect experience. An over-emphasis on continuity would seem to reduce conversion to something closer to adhesion (Travisano, 1981) or more simply socialisation. It would also cut it off from the sociological aspects of conversion. It is the dynamics between the two that must form the central problematic of analysis.

What the above discussion points to is that conceptions for religious identities seem inadequate for grappling with the dynamics of a continuity-change problematic and the place of *religiosity*. The most common conceptualisations in the literature rely on the ideas hybrid, and multiple ‘mosaic’ identities. These also tend to emphasise the cognitive and rational against the mystical. That the literature on conversion to Islam in Britain, otherwise so sympathetic towards centralising converts’ own experiences, slips into these characterizations all too easily and uncritically is indicative I suggest of the status of this position towards *religiosity*. Keeping *religiosity* as part of a mosaic is successful in that it can helpfully contain its perceived problematic, or more strongly, dangerous character, especially given the socio-cultural and

socio-political context and frames in which Islam is (mis)understood more broadly. With regard to the 'multiple', while it may be that in some particular circumstances a different identity category, such as gender or ethnicity, may 'rise to the top' so to speak, this political process of identities need not, perhaps cannot, dilute or displace the religious identity or properly 'secularise' it. These competing claims, however, are both unnecessary and mischaracterise how these affiliations are experienced, negotiated and understood by converts, and misses much of the depth of this *religiosity*. As Soliman has argued, "the idea that individualization necessarily leads to a privatized way of living Islam, on the one hand, or to a fundamentalist understanding of Islam, on the other hand, is rather problematic" (2018: 36). This is because it is simply not necessary to reduce the place of God for believers from providing an overarching wholeness to a mere part.

There is in fact often a good deal more congruity on display than is often acknowledged (also Crossley, 2003; Ewing, 1990). This is precisely because of the religious character, which evades and does not so obviously square with such flattening side-by-side categorical pluralities. The effect of this flattening is that it contains the religious aspect of these identities from its fullest character. The dynamics between continuity and change are reconciled as being congruous with their sense of (evolving) subjectivity, even where it may be a struggle to do so. To offset, if not transcend the mischaracterisation of this, I have argued that Simmel's distinction between *religiosity* and *religion* is a fruitful means of re-centring the relationship with the divine in these accounts. Simmel's dynamic between *religiosity* and *religion* helps appreciate and avoid the potential over-simplifications against essentialism as a matter of a priori principle as this relates to a religious life.

Religiosity, particularly with regard to Islam, if the mainstream press are to be believed, is something at best quaint, albeit anachronistic, that might bring comfort to those who need it. At worst, however, it is something dangerous and to be feared, that can, in the right (or perhaps better, wrong) circumstances instantiate violence, closed-mindedness and extremism of different sorts. The story told here, however, offers a counter. It argues instead that *religiosity* is experienced as heartfelt, profound, reflective, and works for the balance and betterment for those whose core sense of being it forms and orients. Centralising the religious aspect of these conversions, so often neglected or side-lined, can reveal and illuminate much about how converts to Islam experience and understand their conversion.

This represents a qualitative epistemological shift in understanding that allows a transcendence of fragmented identities and contradiction to come into view (Flanagan 2008) that marks a move away from "the a priori exclusion from sociological consideration of an entire class of explanation" (Porpora, 2006, 62). This chapter has sought to attend to these stories and narratives. It has argued a point similar to that made by Helmer, that "the trinity of reason,

religion and theology [can be] reciprocally related and mutually enriching” (2012: 234). The aim of this has been to create a sociological space in which theological motives for conversion can be brought in and, as a result, an often-neglected facet of these conversions can be made more central. This alternative view is to take seriously that for many believers the emotions they experience are experienced as having an extra-social, atemporal, acultural, and ahistorical quality (recognized by Simmel, 1997a [1904]: 43). This helps dispel the competitive element of plural or multiple identities because of the position that “the absolute domination of a single principle at the expense of all the others... would then be raised to a higher plane: [therefore] none would have any cause to feel threatened by any other” (Simmel, 1997a [1912 (1906)]: 138). This preserves the autonomy of *religiosity* whilst also seeing it socially (McCole, 2005).

This, moreover, allows us to make the move toward unsettling the boundaries on which selfhood is commonly understood. It allows a reading with the potential of unsettling currently dominant approaches to understanding and talking about religious identity. From such an understanding the bad faith of the convert can be displaced and resulting exclusionary boundaries in which converts find themselves cast can begin to be permeated. This task will be taken up more fully in the chapters which follow.

To bend and paraphrase Plummer: Ultimately, the conversion story is one concerned with establishing who one really is. Through this story the convert can develop a coherent and congruous sense of a self. Identities are built around religiosity and the experience of this becomes an essence, a way of being in the world. A theological framework helps hold these stories together as they are fitted, however neatly and with whatever linkages and slippages, into them and at the same time add to them and work to challenge them. For these identities exist for oneself, but not just for oneself alone – they also find a home in the wider world (1995: 86). As we will see, *religiosity* and the theological explanations of the narratives are based in real world issues and their daily lives, “born out of struggle and creativity” (Plummer, 1995: 41) – it could of course be no other way. It is to consideration and discussion of this that the following chapters turn.

Chapter 7: Patterns of belonging I: The strangeness of the doubly strange

The focus in this and the next chapters shifts to exploring how aspects of belonging emerge in the narratives. To do this, they take up the dynamics of the second central problematic, a divide between religion and culture as a feature consistent across narratives. Olivier Roy, highlighting the context of processes of globalization and secularization, has conceptualized this disconnection of religion and culture as *deculturation*, and suggests that converts “epitomize [this] phenomenon” (2010: 14). This divide is thus a significant problematic, the dynamics of which warrant extended and considered attention.

An immediate parallel between the previous discussion of Simmel’s *religion* and *religiosity* and the religion-culture divide presents itself. This highlights the importance of how identity and belonging are relational. Having recognized oneself as Muslim as a matter of faith, the dialogic process with both Muslims and non-Muslims doesn’t so much begin as takes on new significance (also Krotofil, 2011), and this will be drawn out below. In approaching dynamics of belonging, as I have already set out, I draw on Simmel’s notion of the *stranger*. As was highlighted in the earlier discussion, the simultaneous characteristics of nearness and distance are central to an analysis along these lines as a way of exploring the tensions inherent in these relations, but doing so in a way that avoids a crude binarism of oppositional positions. This is not least because, in relation to his broader sociological approach, “Simmel... sees society as constituted by interactional ‘forces’ between individuals” (Frisby, 1992: 11, emphasis in original).

Simmel’s characterization offers a good starting point to understanding the patterns and dynamics of belonging for British converts to Islam, and formed a point of reflection emerging from my participants’ narratives related to how they come to feel and understand their position. As Angela remarked:

“I don’t want to pretend either that erm, that converts have some err sort of pure unfiltered view of Islam, because we are products of our own culture and experience and heritage, and that informs our interpretation when we’re, when we’re reading and studying as well. But erm, I think it’s less. It’s less because to some degree we kinda turn our backs a little bit on our own culture erm to, to deliver something new.”

Katarzyna likewise remarks about how she had travelled and worked in different countries and, “I would always be around so many different cultures, so, “I was quite open to consider different points of view. I’m not saying... I don’t say I’m objective. I’m not saying I’m objective. But I guess, I, I, it’s easier for me in a way”.

Before chapter 8 moves to the major part of the discussion along these lines, which will focus on the dynamics of how British Converts to Islam themselves establish (un)belongingness, it is necessary first to determine the context of how they are positioned, or what object positions they find themselves put into, in and of which their claims must be understood. This initial and shorter chapter will focus on this aspect and set important contextual aspects for what follows.

On being positioned

Recalling the discussion from chapter 4, the dominant conceptions in the literature for understanding the social position of British converts to Islam rest on a conceptual in-betweenness. I argued that we can see converts being positioned as doubly estranged as they are moved into a position of strangeness by both those aspects of society they have supposedly ‘left’, whether that be in reference to family, friends, or majority society more broadly, as well as seen as strange by Muslim communities. As a result, it is often said that a convert’s best friend is another convert, and many narrated great relief and excitement when they first found a revert group they could join (also Krotofil, 2011). This is not just because of a level of understanding based on a shared experience of conversion, but also registers the limbo or “no man’s land”, to quote Gayle, they often find themselves stranded in.

This, I suggested moreover, leaves them wandering in something of a conceptual wilderness. In an email exchange prior to our meeting, Rachel responded “my husband and I (we’re both converts) have found we somewhat don’t fit into the categories people like to create based on born Muslims (and many times by born Muslims). It’ll be great to speak to you more about it tomorrow”. The following sections expand on this double estrangement of converts to develop a discussion of the grounds on which processes of estrangement take place, as this will have further implications when we come to discuss their belongingness.

Estrangement I: Being positioned by non-Muslims

Perhaps unsurprisingly this estrangement emerges strongly in relation to friends and family, with family generally being the more significant. Saiorse recalled a conversation, for instance, in relation to being asked about ‘the rules’ of Islam:

“It’s like, ‘Don’t you find it difficult?’ They all say, ‘Was that the hardest part?’
No, the hardest part was telling my family. It was like, ‘The rules, you can’t do
this and you can’t do that. Don’t you find that difficult?’ No, just telling my family
was the difficult part!”

We can begin to see here the gap between the converts’ experience and the perceptions of outsiders. While for Saiorse the most important and hardest aspect is maintaining existing close relationships and concern over how they will be affected by her conversion, the questioner in this exchange struggles to even hear this because they are focussed on pressing her about ‘the rules’, thereby containing her story and her ability to tell it. It is significant that it is precisely this kind perception and discourse on Islam that is present in the wider socio-cultural context that goes a long way to producing the kind of anxiety Saiorse experienced in this regard. This also serves to highlight the significance of a narrative methodology that provides the kind of space that converts so often find is denied them.

As a result, many converts employ various tactics as they gradually integrate certain changes into their daily lives before ‘coming out’. For Richard, this was, albeit unsuccessfully, to prevent his family from being able to say: “‘Oh he’s different since he became Muslim. Oh, you can see he’s gone weird.’ So, I thought no, I won’t say anything, and then you can’t use that line”. This is especially so for women converts when changes in clothing form visual indicators of their conversion and ‘change’. Simran, for example, talks in reference to her mum about adapting her clothing and covering her head with large hoods or a wrapping in a “more western style to please her”. To justify this, she would at times lie about having conditioner in her hair to explain the covering. It is only after a period in which confidence develops sufficiently, or the burden of pretending becomes too onerous that they, as Simran amongst several others phrased it, ‘come out’.

[A continuum of estrangement](#)

As a result of changes in relationships such as these, Ramahi and Suleiman (2017) have suggested that converts find themselves moved into a position of being an ‘intimate stranger’ in relation to close family members. This term is elaborated to capture “benign neglect”, characterised by lack of interest and a disconnect between how the convert and their families perceive their conversion. However, I suggest that rather than a single concept, this is better understood as a continuum in order to capture the variance in experience. While it fits some well, others’ experiences varied from pleasure, to a general rather than specific indifference, to extreme pressure, and even abuse and ostracism.

At the more positive end of the continuum, Lewis, for example, talked about his mum being pleased that “she had got her son back” as she recognized his happiness and fulfilment. A couple of others talked about being surprised by their parents’ ‘as long as you’re happy’ reaction, representing a level of indifference. Yet for others, the reaction is harder. Significantly also, is that it seems that converts of colour on the whole (though certainly not exclusively) suffer at the hands of their family more than white converts (interview with New Muslim circle leader at a prominent mosque). The term ‘intimate stranger’ appears far too benign to be able to encompass some people’s experiences. Rizwan, who was brought up Hindu, was physically beaten and had to leave home. Zaara, who was brought up Hindu/Sikh, and Gayle, who was Christian, were both ostracized by their families. Simran’s mum still wasn’t speaking to her at the time of the interview. These kinds of reactions are frequently contextualised in wider geo-political issues that play out at a local level. Simran, for instance, situates the animosity she experienced at close hand in the “bad blood” that continues to exist between Sikh and Muslim communities stemming from the “backdrop” of post-partition politics.

Estrangement and Islamophobia

The process of being made strange is not only one experienced in relation to those to whom one is close, however. It also emerges in a wider social sense of no longer fitting into the social imaginary. Being positioned as strange by society more generally is dominated by the trope of ‘betrayal’ and can result in verbal and physical abuse in the street, breaching forms of ‘civil inattention’ or an ‘ethic of indifference’, which may otherwise characterize urban civility. Richard, while he was walking to a mosque, for instance, talks about being challenged in the street when a guy tried to punch him shouting, “you’re a disgrace to your country”. Zaara related being shouted at in the street when she was with her children and being called a “terrorist bitch”. Vidya talks about previously wearing niqab and dealing with being verbally abused and spat at in the streets.

Such explicitly aggressive forms of Islamophobia occur more rarely and briefly in the narratives, however. In part this may be because the forms which characterize it are more subtle than explicit (Moosavi, 2015a). Subtle forms can emerge in the background as a general awareness which colours the way converts feel and experience the social world and things that occur in day to day life. Several express a subtle, felt awareness of change in people’s behavior towards them, such as small avoidances or looks. Along these lines the political and social atmosphere and shifts in this psycho-social background can be felt keenly, with some talking about how seeing incidents on the news involving Muslims heightens their awareness of their surroundings as they move through public spaces following these reports. Amber, a 33-year-old administrator who lives in London, for example, struggles to talk about

actual incidences, even when she suggests them, but instead refers to the atmosphere she feels when Muslims are in the news.

Through explicit and subtle ways, British converts are 'othered' and repositioned as part of the cultural landscape, no longer of the majority but part of a minority (Jensen, 2008; van Nieuwkerk, 2004). White converts can be 're-ethnicized' and become decentred as no longer of the majority. Significantly for my concerns, this often represents a conflation of the religious with the cultural and ethnic. White British converts can lose their 'whiteness', it being replaced by an ethno-cultural view of them as Muslim. This repositioning can further be seen in how, as Hannah remarks, the majority of insults for women centre around the perception they have converted to marry, a motivation not borne out empirically (Brice, 2010) but that is also common in media representations. This can be in the form of direct questioning or having phrases like 'Paki lover' shouted at them. In less direct forms, this is captured in a comment Saoirse overheard a mother make to her daughter at a bus stop: "I don't know why these girls do it, they get married to these Asian people and they change their life. You know, they put a scarf on and they think they're one of them". It was in fact remarked to me by one of my participants that her husband was now more pious and practising following her influence, a point also related by a leader of a New Muslim Circle as being a not infrequent occurrence, and which at times can lead to problems or divorce (see also Roald, 2004).

A conflation of religion, ethnicity and culture is also present in the fact that while white converts are estranged from the majority, converts of colour pass invisible from this gaze: they are already racialized as other and go unnoticed as converts. They do, nevertheless, face estrangement often from their more immediate community, tied to similar processes as discussed in relation to family relationships above. While white converts, therefore, experience a downgrading and displacement of their whiteness as an unmarked norm in society (Garner, 2007), this is still so in relation to broader racialization and ethnicization dynamics.

It is, however, and especially when family is set aside, relations with and being positioned by born Muslims that feature predominantly in the narratives. Again, the conflation of religion, culture and ethnicity can also be seen at play.

Estrangement II: Being positioned by Muslims

Relations to born-Muslim communities do not always meet expectations of being welcoming and friendly. Where they may be more so initially, this often cools and converts may come to question the motivations of the initial warmth (Al-Qwidi, 2002; Roald, 2004). A warm welcome in which they are greeted and hugged as a 'brother' or 'sister' following their *shahada* can be

nice, a warmth they have not previously experienced. It is often, however, also weird. As Stephen said, “So everyone wants to come and hug you and get a bit of that purity from you. It’s a bit unusual situation [sic] [laughs awkwardly]”. This may leave some feeling functionalized, where the convert is greeted warmly for their purity and the reward that can be accrued rather than as an individual person, like something of a “collectors’ item”, as Richard put it, or as “a notch on the bed post”, “an arrow in the quiver”, or as “window dressing” as it was also variously construed.

From stranger functionalized to stranger refused

What this begins to represent is how as strangers in relation to Muslim communities converts again experience a continuum of reactions. These are captured in this passage from Gayle’s narrative:

“[Y]ou get two schools of thought: you’re either Madonna and everybody wants to be as close to you and your skin because you are a revert; aaaah, you’re wonderful, you’re so special, which drives you nuts and can be overwhelming. Or you’re a leper; you can’t be a Muslim, you’re just pretending to be a Muslim because you weren’t born a Muslim so you don’t have the understanding. So, therefore, you have to be very careful because possibly you might just be trying to worm your way into our, our families, our communities, our circles to spy on us for the government or something else. Or just because you’re one of these freaky individuals that is just actually wanting to play at being Muslim and it’s gonna be alright in a minute and you’ll go back to your normal.”

Towards a less benign and indifferent end of the scale they can experience outright suspicion and rejection (Roald, 2004; Zebiri, 2008) or be seen as ‘religious imposters’ (Rogozen-Soltar, 2012). They become refused strangers. This exclusion can be based on converts’ background, being from a different culture and not speaking Arabic or ‘cultural’ languages such as Urdu or Punjabi (Roald, 2004; Zebiri, 2002); and especially for black converts, outright racism (Zebiri, 2008). Here again, we can see a conflation between ethnicity, culture and religion. Several of my white participants related stories about being asked where they, or their husbands, “were really from” or the constant assumption of being ‘new’. This last point refers to the issue of being seen as new as a mode of exclusion.

These kinds of issues might lead to pressure to conform to certain practices and exclusion without such conformity. Rosie, for example, talked about the “cultural expectations” she faced “as a Palestinian wife”. From the point of view of her new in-laws she was seen to have

become Palestinian, as this is where her husband and his family were from, and was expected to conform to their ideas of correct role behaviour. Related to domestic duties and how cooking should be done, she lamented that “there must be short cuts”, but remarking of her ex mother-in-law, “But she could tell, she could tell, she was, I, I swear that woman, she’s got like a sixth sense about when I was trying to cheat in the kitchen”.

At times this conflation and refusal may be aggressive. This passage from Saiorse captures her stranger-ness being refused, and it being refused on grounds of her ethnic and cultural background:

“And this went on and on; ‘Well you’re...’, what was the word? You know I’m glad I forgot it ‘cause it was a horrible thing to say. Y’know you’re this and ‘I’m gonna take your scarf off.’ Erm, ‘Go back to your life. You’re European – you shouldn’t wear a scarf. You should be out drinking and partying.’ And I was like ‘No, I’ve been practising Islam for this long, who are you to tell me that?’ ‘I’m a born Muslim’ [he replied]. I said ‘What difference does it make? It says in the Qur’an that... a white person has no superiors [sic] over a black person and a black person over a white person, so y’know we’re no different in the eyes of Islam. A Muslim is a Muslim. If Allah’s chosen you to be a Muslim, you’re a Muslim. You’re no better than me ‘cause you’re a born Muslim. I’m not better than you because I’ve become Muslim.’ So he’s like ‘You’re not Muslim anyway. Your mum’s English and your dad’s Irish.’ ‘So? What difference does it make? They’re not Muslim, doesn’t mean I can’t be a Muslim’... Like, how can you say that?”

Here, the potential positive presence of the stranger is denied through the refusal of the stranger. Moreover, this refusal is based on the claim that as white, with English and Irish parents and a Catholic background, she cannot be Muslim – Muslim here interpreted as an exclusive identity you are born into. In reference to such cases, and in very strong terms, Rosie, not only reflecting on her own personal experience but also those of other converts she has worked with in her role at a local New Muslim organization over the years, talked about ‘religious abuse’. Rizwan likewise characterized such instances of refusal ‘spiritual abuse’ and ‘convert abuse’. The characterization of these experiences in these terms highlights how, even when the root of the discrimination is seen to result from issues related to ‘culture’, it is conceptualized in language that positions it as related to religion. That is, the discrimination is interpreted against their claims as religious subjects, albeit through cultural manifestations.

Further to the refusal of the stranger, however, Saiorse’s passage also brings out the claim to belong, and to belong on the basis of her *religiosity*. As she elsewhere remarked “It’s like he told me not to be who I am”. Additionally, this is a claim that this is (necessarily) tied to a

normative religious universality that is opposed to internal difference and discrimination on the basis of race or ethnicity. For both white converts and converts of colour, the emphasis discussed in this section may reflect that these negative experiences are felt particularly because they are trying to establish their sense of belonging in relation to Islam and Muslims and thus feel this more keenly. For both white converts and converts of colour, what they discover is a religion that does not meet their expectations of being “stubbornly egalitarian” (Ahmed, 1992: 63).

The positioning here is one that is ethnicized, and in this way also reflects the conflation between religion, ethnicity and culture. Following Garner’s call for “a more fluid picture of situational micro-level power relations” (Garner, 2006: 257) in relation to whiteness, Moosavi (2015b) has argued that white British converts experience a loss of white privilege in relation to Muslims. Moosavi argues that: “The binary understanding of whiteness = privilege and non-whiteness = disprivilege must therefore be reconsidered... in some contexts, whiteness can signal subordination rather than dominance, marginality rather than normativity, and disadvantage rather than privilege” (2015b: 1930). Such a loss of privilege may help understand why the emphasis on discrimination from Muslims may be the stronger feature in the narratives.

However, that this emphasis on discrimination from Muslims more than non-Muslims is also true for converts of colour suggests this is not so straightforward. This is exemplified in what Vidya presented to me as her theory on these issues as a preface to a story of how her and a convert friend of hers were treated differently:

“There’s this concept that I would say of a coveted revert. If you [me, the interviewer] were to become Muslim, you would be what I would call a ‘coveted revert’ because of your ethnicity, because of background, because of your skin colour (...), which means that everybody will help you, everybody. You’ll be at everybody’s house for dinner every single day of the week, they’ll give you a place to stay, they’ll find you a wife, they’ll, you know, take care of your babies. Everything is yours because you are a coveted revert. Then those of us, and I say us because I include myself in this specific category of reverts, are not necessarily the non-coveted ones but we are the ‘ethnic converts’, which means that because we come from some type of ethnicity that general Muslims call you know a more diverse minority type of ethnicity, we somehow can manage alone and we somehow can manage without the wide acceptance and support of the community because of our ethnicity.”

To understand this, it is necessary to return to the national level. Whereas for white converts the process of their whiteness moving from an unmarked norm (Garner, 2007) to a marked ethnicized identity comes as something new and often somewhat of a shock, converts of colour carry over previous understandings and experiences of how society is racialized and ethnicized. While white converts may experience this loss of privilege, they may maintain it in relation to converts of colour. In fact, it is precisely for these reasons Adele remarks how most of her experiences in relation to born Muslims have “been fairly positive. Maybe for the wrong reasons”. Thus, while white converts may experience a loss of white privilege in how they are estranged from majority society and how they are positioned as part of Muslim communities, they can simultaneously maintain a position of privilege on the basis of their whiteness vis-à-vis non-white converts in relation to both. This does not in fact go unmentioned by white converts themselves, although this is often a result of it being pointed out to them by non-white convert friends.

Chapter summary: the wilderness of the in-between

In this chapter I have discussed how converts come to be positioned as doubly estranged. This double strangeness is the result of being seen as outsiders on two counts, both of which caution against an over-reliance on ‘contact’. The first is that the potentially positive and contributory status of the *stranger* that Simmel describes is limited or refused. In this sense the stranger is kept outside the group in question: having come from outside, their entry is refused. The second is that of estrangement as the stranger is moved outside the group in question: having been inside, their presence is disavowed. The discussion so far has elaborated on how British converts to Islam are positioned in these ways, or what object positions they are put and understood in. The position of in-between can, and at times is, used as a position to ‘bridge’, as will be seen in relation to Gayle in chapter 9 who uses the fact that she is ‘old’ and white to say “things that others can’t to people they can’t say things to”. Yet, she at the same time complains about converts being functionalized in this way, “like goats – wheeled out when useful”. For this, and the reasons discussed above, a better account is needed that does not assume a useful in-betweenness but investigates how converts position themselves of the social landscape. The following chapter goes on to investigate the dynamics of subject positioning, or how we can see converts as *strangers* and what spaces this is suggestive of.

Chapter 8: Patterns of belonging II: Situating betweenness

In chapter 7 it was argued that converts come to be positioned as doubly estranged. Not infrequently my participants did talk about leading a 'double life'. Simran related 'coming out' to her dad: "just sat down and burst out crying, and I was just like 'Dad, I can't take it anymore... I can't lead a double life anymore". Significantly, however, is that this conflict is felt not because they feel in themselves like two different people, but because they feel pulled in different directions as a result of the dissonance between the personal and social aspects of experiencing being in the world. The rest of this chapter shifts the analytical gaze from one of in-betweenness to one of betweenness, where the dynamics of their intersubjective, relational subject positioning can be brought out. By so doing it explores how they may position themselves as *strangers*, or outsiders, but also how they position themselves as familiars, as belonging, as insiders. Centrally significant for these is the division between religion and culture that converts draw.

This chapter, in order to approach a discussion of the subject positions British converts to Islam carve out for themselves as *strangers*, adopts an analytical frame of how, through their narratives, contemporary British converts to Islam establish senses of *religious insiderness*, *religious outsidersness*, *cultural insiderness*, and *cultural outsidersness* in order to register the aspects of nearness and distance constitutive of the *stranger*. The use of these four lines of discussion is not meant to represent discrete categories, but rather serve as an analytical tool for drawing out the dynamics and connections between the religious and the cultural in converts' narratives, a distinction that is both explicit and implicit, as well as shared and consistent across the narratives. It serves as a way of drawing them out in order to put them back together again. Such an approach is necessary as it focuses on the dynamics between religious and cultural aspects as they are narrated rather than seeing them as either distinct or as one reduced to the other. It also reflects on in what relations of power, with what inclusions and exclusions, and with what effects it is developed. As such, it is also not meant to suggest that there is or can be a neat divide between religion and culture, as will become apparent in the discussion. It is contentious and seemingly arbitrary to assign certain beliefs and practices to the religious brackets and others to the cultural. This is not to suggest that what is referred to as religious or cultural is somehow inherently religious or cultural. Rather, it is to draw out how these are characterized as religious or as cultural as they emerge in the narratives, and to draw out some of the complexity of this.

Narrating Insiderness

A sense of a religious subjectivity is in some ultimate sense a deeply personal experience. The positioning of belonging to Islam as a religious insider is directly related to this sense of *religiosity* as a crucial aspect of how a religious belonging is developed and experienced. It is from this sense of *religiosity* and the dissonance experienced between the personal and social, and also in the context of how they are positioned that the albeit fuzzy line that marks out the religion-culture distinction and divide is found. It is here, moreover, where we find ambivalence and the meeting point in struggles between belonging and not belonging.

Religiosity and insiderness

While often a feeling of 'fit' and a sense of belonging based on *religiosity* comes early in the process, a greater confidence that comes with time is an important part of developing a sense of being able to claim a religious insiderness. This is a result of religious learning and is notable in how the position of the *stranger* is claimed. Rachel, who talks about her social anxiety, found these negotiations particularly difficult and frequently talks about her "wobbles", notably as she finds herself judged from three sides: by Muslims, non-Muslims, and herself. However, as the narrative, and her confidence in both the narrative event and narrated event develop, her voice becomes more strident and it is clear that she is someone who knows her own mind and is not afraid to express it and claim her belonging. That is, this is a process of how belonging to Islam and being part of continually shaping Islam is claimed. Based on *religiosity*, a religious insiderness is developed in negative relation with a position as cultural outsider (see below) – how converts distinguish themselves from "Muslims by name", referring to a form of practice seen as largely devoid of 'proper' religious content. It is from this position that the religion-culture divide proceeds. As Hannah remarks, "there's a great deal of culture in Islam, which isn't Islam".

Following this is a further trend amongst converts: the rejection, or at least extreme caution in deliberately aligning with any particular school of thought or tradition. They instead exhibit loose and peripatetic organizational and institutional affiliations, often as suits the stage of their journey and learning, as well as also their lifestyle (also Jensen, 2011). Katarzyna, for example, who first came to Islam through a Sufi group she was drawn to as she had previously practised meditation, commented that she probably felt closest to Sufism and Sufis as a collective noun under the umbrella of Islam, but still did not consider herself a Sufi and no longer went to the group.

Converts may drop in and out of various groups and mosques until they find somewhere comfortable. For some this may be more 'neutral' spaces such as at universities, rather than 'community mosques'. One convert I spoke to, who already had a wide network of Muslim friends and colleagues, explained that he chose to recite his *shahada* in a university mosque to circumvent the inevitable politics of choosing one mosque over another. Only one of the converts I spoke to followed a particular school of thought, others were aware of the orientation of the particular mosque or group they attended but did not define themselves or their Islam in those terms. Others either showed little awareness of the differences beyond the fact that there were some, while others quite deliberately ignored them.

Converts prefer to rely first and foremost on the Qur'an, and then on sunna and hadith, as my participants frequently emphasized and as has also been found by other studies (Zebiri, 2008). Followingly, it has been suggested that converts represent a specific kind of modern fundamentalist position, with Salafism being particularly highlighted. Salafism is seen as appealing owing to its literalist and anticulturalist stance, which can be seen as purer and empowering (Meijer, 2009), fitting better their position as converts, serving as "a model of postethnic sociability" (Özyürek, 2015: 131). Even those, however, who talk about their liking the structure and authority of Islam, challenge and reinterpret a literal, scriptural reading of Qur'anic injunctions. Matthew, describing himself as a "Qur'an-ist" with "salafi tendencies and principles", and whose narrative is embellished with tales of the early Caliphs, states "I question the legitimacy of whether all hadith of the Prophet is genuine. This is because they were mostly written down the first centuries leading after his death... In some cases they weren't written down formally for 500 years". The return to the fundamentals of scripture then, can be as much one of interpretation and innovation, rather than of literalism and conformity. Saoirse, conscious of our surroundings, wrote down 'salafi' as the school of thought she aligns with so as not to be overheard saying it in the café (despite it being empty other than the staff and two women at the opposite end from us), aware of how that is perceived as being doctrinally conservative. Nevertheless, at numerous points she expressed anything but conservative social attitudes; the occasion of an older man with long grey hair, dressed in all black and wearing high-heeled boots walking past the window did not prompt a point of reflection on traditional, conservative gender roles but of the value and richness of pluralism and of people being able to live confidently and dress accordingly. In fact, the term Salafi itself can be a deceptively 'elastic' label and refer to a wide spectrum of political positions (Inge, 2016: 8, 10). As Hegghammer (2009: 249) has suggested "the term 'Salafi' is often better understood as a bid for legitimacy than an indication of a specific political programme", and here that legitimacy is related to claims of religious insiderness.

For my participants, this would just as often be in ways which may evoke a 'stubbornly egalitarian' view rather than a conservative one. A literalist and anticulturalist stance can be

seen interpreted in very much a sense of following the spirit rather than the letter of law, and the spirit rather than the exact actions of the companions of the Prophet. This can serve to distinguish between *religiosity* and *religion* in a way which opens up interpretive space, and it is on these grounds that my participants develop their sense of religious insiderness. Zaara, for example, remarks, “the reason I didn’t take hijab was because I wasn’t ready to because of lack of knowledge. And I’m not gonna do something because somebody tells me to or because it has to be done, I need to know why (...) when I realised it’s actually a commandment from God, from Allah, I decided to take it because it’s practising my faith. That’s what hijab means to me”.

Opening up this interpretive space, which we might even refer to as an informal form of *ijtihad* in part to register the critical character how it is approached, is important as it is on these grounds that they may challenge rather than conform to dominant conceptions of what is and is not considered Islamic by asking for evidence from these scriptural sources, even often treating answers they receive with suspicion. Hannah, for example, talks about asking people to show her things they have claimed in the Qur’an or sunna: “well, it has to be in there, doesn’t it? Because you’re saying...”. Rachel, likewise, talks about her frustration at being told “cultural things and saying that that was Islam. And then when I questioned it, getting told off”. In response to being told she “should dress like an Arab woman... There’s a hadith”, she responds “[gently sarcastic and with the milder frustration attained by temporal distance] ‘Oh okay, is there’. Is it made up by any chance?” This, then, represents not merely a claim to belong on the basis of *religiosity*, but also the claim on this basis to be able to interpret, contribute to and help shape the forms of *religion*.

Here then, a form of scriptural fundamentalism is understood as being the stripping away of the ‘cultural baggage’ of Muslim communities to reach the ‘spirit’ at the core of Islam and be able to fulfill a “purer practice” as Zaara put it. Moreover, a form of practice that is quite in keeping with rather than anachronistic to, and certainly not perceived as alien to, life in Britain. Jensen argues in relation to her work with Danish converts that while they may be “attracted to Islam as an authoritative tradition, their belief is informed by individuality and autonomy, features that characterize general forms of modern religiosity in Western Europe” (Jensen, 2006: 643). They are of course not actually ‘freer’ from cultural baggage and such sentiments belie how their own cultural background remains unmarked or faded by being the ‘norm’. This position, nevertheless, is central to their belonging as *stranger*. We must be careful not to overstate the parochialism of autonomy, however. It may risk sleepwalking into an essentialized notion of Islam as an ‘authoritative’ religious tradition. There has always been space for doubt in Islam and an emphasis on “personal endeavor, never by accepting things on the authority of others” (Bowker, 2015: 99).

Religion and practice

It is time now to develop this discussion in relation to practice and lifestyle changes following conversion, which were touched upon in chapter 6.

The fact that Islam is seen as 'lived' is a strong appeal. We have already noted that for Simmel *religiosity* activates *religion*, and seen how this proves fundamental to how religious insidership emerges, noting the significance of how this lived quality is one which is steeped in a religious character. Given this, and its prominent place within Islamic ritual practices, it is perhaps unsurprising that prayer is so central and powerful to both part of the initial attraction of Islam for many, and also to this (developing) sense of *religiosity*. For Kate, for instance, prayer "is when I really started to love God". While acts were often an essential part of an initial attraction to Islam, which came about through talking to people, witnessing prayer, or experiencing a Muslim majority country, for example, it is, nevertheless, very much the religious character of these acts that is so powerful and striking for my participants. The form of prayer reflects a relationship with God, and how that is manifested in the world and daily life. The warmth, openness and friendliness of Muslims, when this warmth is perceived as genuine and whether in Britain or abroad, is put down to religion rather than anything specifically national or cultural. This warns against focusing on the ritualistic and visible against those less visible elements, such as morality, philosophy and spirituality (Bectovic, 2011).

Nevertheless, the separation between religion and culture and the apparent ease and fit of Islam that is established through a sense of a congruous religious self belies difficulty and struggle with the culture or *religion* side of the religion-culture or *religiosity-religion* dynamic. The actual rite (if that is not too strong a term) of becoming Muslim is comparatively simple, involving sincerely reciting the *shahada* in front of at least two witnesses. This, however, is not to suggest conversion is either easy, a simple matter of belief, or that conversion simply is a matter of inner belief; that "the boundary between being non-Muslim and being Muslim is very fluid, and easily crossed" (Zebiri, 2008: 94) is a little simply stated. Changes to lifestyle, dress and diet follow and may well have begun prior to their *shahada*. The five daily prayers represent a significant lifestyle reorientation. Fasting during Ramadan is celebrated for its spiritual aspects but requires getting used to. Some noted how the time of year it falls in relation to the time of conversion can make a big difference, the long summer days being particularly difficult, especially for a beginner. Giving up pork and alcohol is often an easier adaptation, although sourcing halal meat can mean bulk buying on longer shopping trips depending on where a convert lives. Changes to traditional celebrations can create a good deal of ambiguity. Being more restricted in socializing (some, though not all, may stop going to places private or public where alcohol is being served) can also represent a positive move towards a better lifestyle as well as difficulty in terms of maintaining older friendships. A new

vocabulary will also be learnt. Even if Arabic is not studied to a level of communicative competence, many terms that relate to important Islamic precepts and practices are generally incorporated into everyday use. The taking of a new name is sometimes also adopted, although not always and at times strongly resisted.

These changes are experienced as difficult to greater and lesser extents, in which personality (on this more generally see, van der Zee & van Oudenhoven, 2014), social support and acceptance, and reaction of family and friends all play significant roles. Furthermore, approaches to some practices will vary greatly, such as attitudes to music, for instance. To what extent and in what combinations these or other practices are adopted varies, as will the time of their adoption and how they may change over time. What is central here, however, is how these practices are important primarily and consistently because of the relation, motivation and intention stemming from *religiosity*. What we find is that intention coupled with *religiosity* form a central orienting aspect of the negotiations in this dynamic.

What is central to these practices is religious subjectivity and its development, no matter the precise variance in practice itself; “Erm, to be a good person, to perfect your character, that’s what it’s meant to be about” as Katarzyna put it. An oversimplified focus on right acts causing piety does not necessarily illuminate the meanings and social relations. Where a practice or disposition cannot be or simply is not drawn into the religious orbit, it is a site of struggle (Piela, 2015). Part of the dynamic for converts is figuring out which behaviours and dispositions, and their material manifestations, it is desirable to cultivate, and which can be rejected, and subsequently, which are narrated with a religious quality and which with a cultural quality. Some feel right, as Katarzyna remarks about giving up alcohol, for example, “It felt right to not get drunk so often to erm, you know, have a certain discipline in your life”. Others, however, do not. This also reflects walking an at times ambivalent line between the authoritative and autonomous. Rachel, for instance, was relating a story about going to a friend’s in a three-quarter length top and being told her wrists were immodestly exposed:

“And I was thinking, it’s my wrist. Surely they’re not going to have a heart attack over my wrist! Erm so I found that lots of people were very very conservative or very very liberal or somewhere in between but sort of came out with stuff without thinking about how am I interpret it [sic], or judge myself about it. So that did trigger a lot of wobbles. I’m a wobbly person anyway. But I’d say now I’m a lot less wobbly than when I was when I first converted or just before I converted ‘cause it was just, there was so much to think about and so much overwhelming stuff. And then people sort of sticking their nose in and giving their two penneth, which didn’t particularly help.”

In a later and similar, although more confident, passage Rachel relates:

“Erm what just because someone says they’re part of the religion doesn’t mean they all think the same way. So actually, I’d sort of categorised people in my head of, right they think that way, and they think that way, but actually all these ways are acceptable and they’re okay. So almost making sure that I kept an open mind of what people thought and then keeping that in mind but then decided how I thought, which was a bit of a minefield because of so many opinions on things like, can you show your feet. Now there’s four schools of thought, three of them say no, you should never show your feet. ‘Cause men get so turned on by feet, you should always cover them up, which I think is ridiculous. Erm and I tend to overheat a lot, during the summer I am constantly in flip flops and if someone wants to, you know, fantasise about my toes, I’m really not bothered, but I’m not going to overheat for the sake of covering my feet up.”

The ultimate authority as established in the narratives is God. As Matthew, Rachel’s husband, expresses it: “the idea that a man’s [word] would be above God’s, to me it doesn’t make any sense”, and “I don’t know how God will judge anyone. If anything, I expect I’d be judged more harshly than those people because I’ve subscribed to set values which I believe are His values. I believe I’ll be questioned to make sure that I’m fulfilling those values that I’ve sworn an oath to essentially by saying my *shahada*, you know”. By making such moves as those described here, they are not just questioning practices and seeking a compatibility with the context of modern Britain, but also undermining power relations that inhere. Significantly, it is this move that opens up the space for the religion-culture dynamic as captured in this passage, again from Rachel:

“Erm so as I say inner changes would be figuring out what I felt about things and not taking things for gospel when people say stuff. And when you ask for proof, so for example someone said, ‘Oh well the hadith that says this’, I say okay where’s your proof? Where’s your reference for that? And if they couldn’t provide it, I’d be like I’m not going to believe that then thank you very much.”

This is not merely about practices as physical acts, but, as the emphasis on intention suggests, also relates to the ‘emotion regime’ of what is considered appropriate in a given situation (Riis and Woodhead, 2010) and how emotion is ‘cognitively structured’ in a particular ‘emotional attitude’ (Azari and Birnbacher, 2004). While in some ways converts seek to cultivate the correct emotional response in particular situations, this also can be challenged along similar lines. Both Hannah and Julia talk about how their loudness and personalities contravene certain acceptable norms, something not infrequently pointed out to them by others. Nevertheless, they also stress how this can show non-Muslims that they are ‘normal’ people. Moreover, such an

attitude can also be beneficial for, particularly as women, getting things done in a male dominated community or mosque. Julia, for instance, mused about how “we live in a man’s world in Islam”, then talked about developing sufficient confidence with her insiderness that, “then I changed my attitude, I turned into a west class Muslim woman and I was like ‘fucking move out of the way, I need to speak to the imam’”.

This assertiveness, the development of which enabled her to reconcile her place in Islam with her sense of personality, is also linked to the respect she now feels. Notably, it is the cultural context of her personality, as ‘a west class Muslim woman’, which enables this, and which suggests an implicit contrast with greater compliance to patriarchal structures of non-western Muslim women. For Hannah, this challenging of a public emotional norm was related to her grown up children from before she was Muslim. She relates stories of watching one son box in a nightclub and the after party of another who is a gay pop singer, and the ensuing struggle between ‘proper’ behaviour and supporting her children in a way congruous with her personality and their lives in Britain. Ultimately, she concludes “he’s my son, I’m his mother, that’s where we leave it, we’re done. So, things like that, you know erm are an issue for other people but not for ourselves”.

Habitus: conformity, whose conformity?

We are now in a position to return to consideration of habitus, where the question of relation to authority and innovation arises from Mahmood’s (2005) rendering of agency as docility. The question here is to whom or what one is submitting. The reading of my participants’ narratives being put forward here suggests that we can see the kind of agency as docility that Mahmood described, albeit with a twist. When and in so far as converts do and can draw certain aspects into the religious orbit, they do work on themselves with the future-oriented perspective of becoming discussed in chapter 6. As such, they do so in some ways which adhere to what might be considered an Islamic orthodoxy and at times mused on aspects of their behavior they were unable to effect at the moment but that may change in the future. However, what this discussion also suggests is that this is also a site of resistance and of reinterpretation. Here then, they can be seen to be reclaiming the *stranger* as a positive position that imports qualities into the group.

For Moosavi, habitus was the site of a deliberate, tactical performance, with the notion’s explanatory purpose being the goal of acceptance through conformity to a particular community (concomitant perhaps with Hervieu-Léger’s ‘convert’, who makes a choice to belong, in contrast to ‘pilgrim’, who is on a more individual journey, see Michel, 2009). The discussion here, however, presents a rather different picture. As Vidya said, “For me, becoming more practicing means somebody who fulfils the obligations required by them of the religion”. This

results in “day by day you find yourself in a position where your life is not based upon the daily activities of the world, it’s based on the daily activities of your religion... And that’s what I feel becoming a practising Muslim is all about”. Zaara was in no doubt of herself when she said:

“But erm I’m not like blind following if you know what I mean. And, and this is for me. It’s my Islam. My conversion is for me. This is about me finding a place in the world and being content with it. And, and I am. And, and I’ve not looked back. I’ve no regrets. I don’t find Islam difficult at all. I don’t find any restrictions. Some things that err do raise issues err that sometimes I find controversial, like say if my husband came to me and said ‘d’you know what darling I want a second wife’. Well, he’ll get a punch in the face, that’s the first thing. So I’m not obliged and I love that freedom aspect.”

Seeing religious practice as a tactic of social acceptance misses the depth, dynamics and importance of how a religious identity is felt, experienced and developed and, as a result and on that basis, how converts position themselves in relation to Muslims and Muslim communities and claim religious insiderness. What becomes significant here, is that practice, far from a tactical mode of performance with the goal of establishing belonging to a particular community that it seeks to emulate, instead forms the basis from which religion is distinguished from culture and, moreover, sits in this way in negative relation to cultural outsiderhood (see below). That is, that from these grounds converts critique and challenge rather than seek conformity with Muslim communities. Hannah, for instance, talks proudly about how her position as *stranger* can have positive effects. Talking about questioning the claims of born Muslims on Islamic propositions, asking them to show it to her in the Qur’an or sunna, she says: “Erm, *mash’allah* I’ve made people question their own faith and, and come better onto the *dīn* just through my stupidity. What I would think was stupidity, just going ‘but I can’t find it anywhere, I can’t find it’”. This reflects how converts are able to and do claim and position themselves as religious insiders. *Religiosity* forms the basis on which religious belonging is both opened up and claimed. That is, while through these processes converts relate more easily and readily to Islam, this itself does not necessarily correlate with how they relate to Muslims.

What this indicates is that this drawing into a religious understanding also reflects the process of becoming, and how again through narrative this is built into the process of self-making. It is in this process of drawing certain practices into their religious self that converts construct these aspects as being congruous with their sense of (evolving) subjectivity, even where it may be a struggle to do so. That is, specific acts can change and change meaning, while others may be desired but remain unrealised. This is where the causality of the Aristotelian form of habitus requires greater nuance and where the theological ear that orients us toward *religiosity* and

intention become important. The examples given so far reflect the process of becoming, but, moreover, how other factors, such as social and political circumstances, are also critical.

'Elastic orthodoxy'

The concomitant negotiations between the religious and the cultural, and between the authoritative and autonomous, reflect a form of what has been called 'elastic orthodoxy'. This represents how converts "work tactically within this framework [the local consensus on what it means to be Muslim], stretching it to apply to new contexts and situations" (DeHanas: 2016: 78). Being a stranger is neither about simple conformity nor reform but about negotiation, experimentation and 'fit' between aspects of oneself and one's context that do not so obviously square with one another, certainly at least from the perspective of others. Here then, experiential as well as doctrinal knowledge is emphasized (also Piela, 2015). Significant also is that this represents scope for including points of connection and distinction between how converts position themselves as religious insiders whilst also claiming a unique position in relation to Muslim communities. Lindsay, who coined the term 'elastic orthodoxy' construed it as, "the ability to maintain a core set of convictions without being so rigid that [one] cannot cooperate with others who do not share them" (2007: 216). Such an elastic orthodoxy may in fact represent an inevitability if we agree that contemporary society demands reflexivity and as such a religious reflexivity becomes necessitated in how religiosity is negotiated in contemporary Britain (Marti, 2015). This itself is a core aspect of how the dynamic interactions between *religiosity* and *religion* take place and develop.

An elastic orthodoxy, nevertheless, is not just an attempt to render Islam into a form felt more compatible with life in modern Britain. There are other aspects, which also speak of the broader context of the social imaginary in and of which converts are making these negotiations. Richard exemplifies one of these, which can be seen to reflect the understanding that religion in modern society should be, at least certainly in its most visibly obvious forms, kept private rather than displayed and performed publicly. For Richard, his charity work with the homeless reflects both his religious sensibility and sense of social justice, he in fact understands it as a form of *da'wah*. As he relates:

"...that should be what makes you up, that structure rather than just the beard and the hat. That's just extreme, that's not necessary. It's how you live your life, that's what you're defined by, that's how you're remembered. And that's where people say like 'Oh I know a Muslim', 'What's he like?' 'Yeah, he does good stuff. He helps mentor kids, he goes and helps the homeless'. To me that's putting it into practice; that's living the life rather than just saying that's what I am... you're not really doing it unless you're living it".

For him, it is these acts which are more important than and contrasted with “unnecessary” public displays of piety such as praying in the street. As he remarks of this, “I sort of think I’m quite western in my way of looking, right[ly] or wrong[ly]”. What this also represents is how this forms not just commitment to his faith, but also “vivif[ies] [his] commitment to the social good” thereby also serving to transmit an Islamic moral code that can be seen to operate on religious as well as civic terms (Weithman, 2004: 50).

A further aspect of being a religious insider in relation to elastic orthodoxy is tied to their developing confidence and negotiations through the barriers of being positioned. Katarzyna, for example, talks about ‘making do’ by sneaking into department store changing rooms to pray, in part because she feels unable to go to a mosque. She recognises that this is far from ideal and affects how she can be a Muslim in society for now, but that it certainly does not affect how she feels she is a Muslim.

Acts contribute to the making of the self but are not exclusively the making of the self. Such things cannot always be so simply “read from the body” (Dwyer, 1999: 10) or as some kind of linear ‘building up’ of acts and behaviours. That is, piety and acts which constitute its development represent the intersection and mutual constitution between the religious, scriptural, personal, cultural and social.

Cultural Insider

In relation to establishing a sense of cultural insiderness, we can see this predominantly in relation to Britain, and the culture or part of society they are so often positioned as having ‘left’ or ‘betrayed’, therefore, highlighting the contrary view of Islam’s compatibility with Britain.

One way these emerge is in fairly simple statements and claims of normalcy, such as Richard’s declaration, “I’m just a normal bloke”. Very often, however, the claims are more explicit and bold. Richard states, “I’m English. I live in England. Saudi is for the Saudis”. Likewise, Zaara declares, “I’m still me. I’m still Zaara from the East-End”. Responding to “a big pressure to almost convert to being Asian or Arab” Rachel here asserts her cultural outsiderhood in relation to some Muslim communities simultaneously with and as a direct contrast to claiming her insiderhood to Britain when she continues, “no, that’s a British thing. I’m staying British thank you very much”. These forthright assertions are made in this way precisely because it is felt they need to be made in the face of the process of their being repositioned and dislocated from belonging.

As with religious insiderness, there is a strong sense that belonging is something felt. Significant is when they appear in the narrative. They very often appear in this explicit way embedded in stories of facing public forms of discrimination or abuse, either personal attacks or in broader reference to the social context and difficulties in being Muslim in Britain. In this way, they form a rebuttal and a challenge. In one passage, for instance, Zaara, when discussing discrimination and attacks against Muslim women and the government's response, rails, "I was outraged and I was furious and I wanted to talk to Cameron¹². I wanted to phone him and say 'you wanna come down the East End mate and have a pie 'n' mash with me and I'll teach you about London culture'". Julia also inveighs against a view of the oppressed, passive and sexless Muslim woman to dispel any sense of her alienness in this regard:

"I go into Ann Summers shops to look at vibrators and stuff. Like, people look at me and go 'Oh God, does she actually have sex, d'you actually have sex with them? How can a guy find you attractive wearing all that?' Well actually we don't wear this at home. D'you know we we we actually dress up for our husbands, we wear makeup at home, we we wear lingerie at home, we actually wear short miniskirts at home, we wear leggings at home you know; we look attractive to our husbands at home and our family at home, you know. But yeah, I get that a lot. You get a lot of people like, 'Shit man, she is actually buying a vibrator'. Yeah, we have sex love. And what I do? I wind them up and pull out the biggest black one. I'm like, 'How much is this?' Yeah, it's funny".

The way women should be treated in Islam is frequently highlighted as a factor, by women, and sits against how women are seen to be too often treated in both Muslim and non-Muslim communities. Adele, who had divorced while still Catholic, talks about how being told that "a divorcee isn't seen as lesser" in Islam, contrasted with being viewed as an "outcast" by Catholics and helped dispel some doubts that she had about her place in Islam as a woman. For Vidya, it was the framework of Islam that taught her "this is my body, this is my brain, this is my heart, this is my soul, these are my things". Moreover, she emphasizes that she is a strong Muslim woman who is comfortable with how she behaves, what she does and wears not "because someone tells me, not because some man comes and tells me what I should put on my body and what I shouldn't put on my body, or the way I should act". For Gayle, it was Islam that gave her a place to belong precisely because it helped her be "somebody that, hey, I needed to have an opinion, and I needed to say an opinion, and I had a life". Yet this framework is activated from a sense of *religiosity* that holds the potential to learn "the true meaning of these things". The religious underpinning may contrast with secularization, but the resulting beliefs and values are seen as perfectly at home with secular values and ideals in

¹² David Cameron, the British Prime Minister at the time of interview.

many ways. They are a direct challenge and push back against sets of discourses which tout their 'othering' as religious subjects set against secularized understandings, as well as their being positioned as a cultural 'other'. This, therefore, suggests the congruity felt between being British and Muslim and the frustration at this being questioned. It also represents the claim that Islam belongs.

This is not just about certain practices, however, but is also linked to values, ways of thinking, and ways of being in and of the social world. To quote Susanne, relating her coming to realise the religion-culture divide and how people from different backgrounds expressed God: "For me, it was a very, very colourful way of seeing that, you know, really it's about my way because essentially I have always been European, I can never become eastern. My religion is an eastern religion, but I can never become eastern unless I incorporate that into my European way of thinking". This is also reflected in scholars that converts frequently cite as influential and helpful, figures such as Tariq Ramadan, Abdul Hakim Murad (Tim Winter), Hamza Yusuf, Noumen Ali Khan, and Mufti Menk. These are all seen to present and explain Islam in ways relatable and relevant to the contemporary context, contrasted with being told to consult a scholar in Pakistan, for example, which "has no relevance whatsoever", to quote Rachel. These sources have proven particularly valuable given the isolation and confusion converts often find themselves confronted with.

There are times when what might be called more cultural aspects of Islam are highlighted, or the 'pull factors' beyond just faith. This is part of the 'framework' Islam provides for life and society. Here we can see an overlap between a form of cultural insiderness in relation to being Muslim, as well as also often part of how cultural insiderness to Britain emerges. Abstention from alcohol and monetary interest are linked with less damaging ways of living for both self and society. In relation to changes in lifestyle discussed above, the "enhanced ethics", to quote Rosie, that this is based on are seen to not only be the more significant aspect, but also to concord with British values, which in turn "are totally in synch with my faith".

Islam's compatibility with science and general scientific understandings of the world are also consistently emphasized. This itself reflects and challenges the wider context in which science and religion are so often readily opposed as well as the importance and relevance of scientific explanations and reasoning itself in the modern British context *alongside* explanations and reasonings based on faith. This echoes Bowker's distinction between God as primary cause but which may be "exercised through the secondary causalities in the created order on which we in general focus our attention" (2015: 153). While it is stressed that scientific understandings have their limits, the importance of a scientific worldview within these (or what's seen as its own) limits is not only an important justificatory aspect of the narratives, but also in several forms a significant barrier in understanding they had to overcome before accepting

Islam. There are three emergent strands to this. It demonstrates that there is no conflict between faith and science and that Islam fits in the modern world. It also demonstrates that Islam's understanding of the world from a scientific viewpoint is accurate and ahead of its time. That is, that certain scientific knowledge that could not have been known at the time the Qur'an was compiled can be found referenced in the text. These may be related to ideas such as the expansion of the universe or topographical features. It also demonstrates the scientific benefits of certain aspects more related to everyday life, such as when Simran talks about (unsuccessfully) trying to explain to her mum the scientific benefits of not eating pork to show her how it fits in the world.

In relation to Islam, a sense of cultural insiderness relates to how certain practices are established as having been the same, or at least very similar to, a person's practice before coming to Islam. These practices are developed as a form of personal cultural continuity: that is, they are not first and foremost presented with a religious quality, although this may become an aspect. Hannah, for instance, remarks how she didn't drink beforehand so "some things align neatly". This is of course a complex area as it is managed and narrated in different ways. Furthermore, some things of course do not align neatly, which can create a strong sense of dissonance. The fact that some practices are narrated as religious whereas others are narrated as cultural tells us something important. It indicates how certain what are referred to here as cultural practices are assimilated by the converts as personal cultural congruity, they already dressed modestly or didn't drink alcohol, for example, before coming to Islam in contrast to others that are assimilated by being given or understood on the basis of religious content.

Narrating Outsiderness

Having already discussed the way converts may be positioned as outsiders in the previous chapter, in this and the following section the focus is on ways in which converts position themselves in this way and further develops links with the two insider sections above. This reflects the sense of this *stranger* relation not as one to be overcome through assimilation but is one which can be positive and contributory.

Religious Outsider

A sense of being a religious outsider emerges in relation to their religion or belief, including non-belief, of heritage.

An initial way religious outsidership is experienced in relation to the religion of upbringing and that it is theologically unpersuasive. Certain theological precepts, contrasting the simplicity and oneness of God in Islam with the Trinity and the idea of Jesus being both human and divine in various Christian traditions or the array of gods or manifestations of God in Hinduism, are seen as distracting and confusing (also Zebiri, 2008).

The sense of being a religious outsider in relation to one's heritage is also based on the view of this being largely a nominal, cultural tradition rather than religious. To quote Adele, "it's kind of like something people do traditionally and culturally now rather than it being something that people follow as a faith". Adele talks about how her own sense of *religiosity* didn't seem to fit in with her practising Catholicism, causing her to "feel like a stranger in there [meaning both her church and the Church]". Many in fact gave the religion of their upbringing "a shot", to use Vidya's phrase, but found it lacking. For her, Hinduism was "more about culture and tradition". For many this is related to their questioning why certain things are or are not done in a certain way, and not getting satisfactory answers, being told to not ask questions but just follow. Sanjay, for instance, related a story where he asked "How do you know God is blue? How do you know God has eight arms? How do you know God rides this tiger?... and the answer was either err a backhander across the top of my head or erm just a, 'look, this is the way it is'". This stands in contrast to Islam being able to supply the answers, and often Muslims being more patient of similar questioning, or at least not making up answers.

In addition, part of 'living it' is related to the practical framework of Islam for life. This relatability to life was important: "The things that you can put into practice and will allow you to live your life in a good, honourable, happy way, d'ya know what I mean?" to use Sanjay's rhetorical question. Kate, for example, in fact referred to Muhammad and why she liked him so much being because he was a "pragmatic realist", who not only provided religious and moral teaching, but also laid a pattern for society "on a state level", which she didn't find in Christianity. She remarked, "It's more realistic and I really like that about the religion". Islam provides the possibility of a fusion of *religiosity* with *religion* and living the right way, which is what Richard means when he says, "you're not really doing it unless you're living it".

This distinction in some ways mirrors their developing religious insidership and is concomitant with their critiques of 'cultural Muslims'. An interesting dynamic in regard to this is an indictment of Christians or Hindus, for example, and their behaviour as a turn off, but not necessarily the same turn off toward Islam despite similar criticisms. An important part of this dynamic is precisely that many born Muslims either imbue 'cultural' practices with (questionable) religious significance or merely perform certain actions and practices without the perceived right, religious, intention. This, therefore, appears to be a paradox, one which is often expressed and left as asides in the narratives, perhaps reflecting its difficulty by virtue of being

contradictory. By appreciating *religiosity*, however, we can avoid seeing this simply as a muddled contradiction or paradox. Taking religious insiderness and its focus on *religiosity* as a start point, converts' critiques of born Muslims can be seen as points of critique from within and as such do not result in the dismissal of the whole. Critiquing other faiths from the outside produces a collapse between parts and whole. Other religions Rosie looked at fell short of providing this balance between *religiosity* and *religion*. Buddhism, for example, seemed more like a "dressed up atheism" for theological and philosophical reasons; the lack of a creator and divine authority, which fitted Rosie's narrative, religious journey. They, therefore, certainly position themselves as religious outsiders in relation to other religions on theological grounds with theological references and explanations, but ultimately what emerges as fundamental, and what solves the contradictions inevitable of religion, is the deep, felt connection of *religiosity*.

Cultural Outsider

The sense of being a cultural outsider emerges in both relation to born Muslims as well as majority society. For the latter, this is significantly related to a critical position vis-à-vis dominant cultural patterns but must also be read alongside their sense of personal congruity and cultural insiderness. This is because these establish the sense of cultural belonging discussed above. It must, therefore, be understood with the appreciation that being critical of one's country and aspects of its politics and culture is of course perfectly normal and common: again, as criticisms from within they are seen as unremarkable. In this way, their faith and national identities are not seen as contradictory or unreconciled. What may seem a contradictory relationship according to certain discourses, becomes more simply and banally ambivalent in a manner which need not threaten this belonging.

What arises in this relation is that while converts hold ambiguous relationships with aspects of Britain, being very often critical of western lifestyles as over-individualistic, materialistic, and over-sexualized, especially of the female body (also Zebiri, 2008; Pędziwiatr, 2017; Younis and Hassan, 2017), there is in fact a greater deal of subtlety than cruder binary or 'clash' conceptions of Islam and the West, and converts as critical of the West on Islamic grounds, suppose. This often emerges as part of the emotion logic of the narrative, expressing the feeling of not fitting in with particular lifestyles prior to coming to Islam. Such cultural conventions as drinking on a Friday night, were things that, to quote Rosie, she "got rid of what didn't really matter in the grand scheme". Similarly, Simran talked about how as part of the process of change "you generally just become interested in different things".

In this way, for many, friendships also change and are reoriented. The past-oriented aspect of continuity means that a sense of not quite fitting all along can be managed and old friendships reevaluated; some may be kept but others fall away. This is often based on lifestyle patterns such as realizing that their friendships, rather than being 'genuine', were actually just "built on the going out aspect" and drinking, as Adele put it. Furthermore, this is in relation to a future-oriented sense of needing friends that fit with the process and the rhythm and patterns of daily and social life, although this can be difficult, and varies greatly. Several kept old friends closer, even when losing many, and found making genuine, new, Muslim friends, or "really, like, friends friends friends friends friends" as Kate put it, difficult. This can make certain times of the year hard as they become isolating, and why, for example, for Kate "Eid is just so crap". There is in this sense of not belonging to the dominant cultural and lifestyle patterns a direct relationship with the framework of Islam that provides a basis for belonging discussed above. For it is that framework which is seen to provide the way of the good life they feel has been lost in Britain. In fact, this dynamic between cultural belonging and unbelonging is present at times in laments about how society has changed, and changed for the worse. Rosie told a story of being part of a large group having iftar in the local park and having a conversation with an old woman passing by walking her dog. The woman commented on how nice it was to see families enjoying the park, something she hadn't seen for a long time. Rosie concludes the story: "well it's a human thing but also a very British thing, the whole, you know, like you remember when they used to have street parties and things like that and the families would come out. And I think we don't do that enough anymore, and yet the Muslim community does it. You know, so we're, we're doing things that were the done thing here 30-40 years ago, we're still doing them, you know. And I think that's something that would be good for the wider community to see and to join in, you know take it as an example".

The strongest way cultural outsidemess emerges, however, and one that was prominent throughout narratives, was positioning themselves in relation to born Muslims, a rejection of certain 'cultural' values, practices and forms of dress. Many of my interviews were bookended, that is they formed the main trope of the discussion either side of the actual recording, by just such references. This prominence may itself also be seen to reflect their implicit sense of congruence between being Muslim and being British as well as what forms the major part of their everyday struggles. This must be read alongside negotiations of how converts feel Islam can belong in Britain and as British.

It is here, also, that their position as *stranger* is asserted and claimed in this relation. Here, practices seen as religiously 'empty' and a matter of culture and tradition as well as those that are presented as Islamic but are 'actually' cultural are called into question. In some cases this might be expanded to wider behavior. Angela, for example, talks about a corrupt imam who was caught stealing from a supermarket and selling the goods on, but who was able to remain

an imam after being caught. Commenting on the unIslamic behavior of some Muslims, she remarks, “the greatest shame is that they still hold onto the idea of being Muslim as being their primary identity, when it’s really, it’s their cultural identity, not their religious identity”. This, she goes on to say, has a detrimental effect on the religion as a whole because people who “are not living up to the integrity of the religion, but who still very much pride themselves on being Muslim and this, the conflating of those two is very damaging to Islam”. Here, the unIslamic act of stealing is therefore perceived to rupture the imam’s claims of being Muslim in a religious sense. We find here a separation between a sociological identity of Muslim contrasted with one founded on *religiosity* and the modes of behavior and conduct that are seen as integral to it.

At other times certain attitudes and practices were quite simply (even curtly) dismissed as something like obvious nonsense. Gayle refers to the “culturally ignorant interpretations” of Islam by born Muslims themselves. She in fact remarked how fear of Muslims from the wider population was “understandable given how much stupidity” there is. Saoirse talks about how she will happily stop and stroke dogs in the street, whereas “a lot of Muslims here, they wouldn’t go near a dog ‘cause it’s this, that and the other”. Rosie talked about Muslim communities needing to “get over” certain issues, for instance, “arguing about, you know, do you have to take your socks off when you make *wudu*”. Others mentioned similarly ‘trivial’ things such as being told to sit down when drinking water, eating with your right hand, and being told off for not calling women ‘aunty’ or men ‘uncle’.

The exact practices, forms of dress and so on that are rejected vary between individuals, yet the feature is a consistent one. Asserting the cultural difference, and representing the relation between cultural outsiderness and insiderness, Rachel remarked, “To me, in our society we do make eye contact, we do chat to people, we do make small talk, ‘Oh the weather’s crap outside. Have you seen it? Yeah, it’s freezing ha ha. To me, that’s not flirting – it’s just you making chit chat”. Intention is again vital here as this is perfectly compatible with Islamic modesty in the way it is tied to intention – the intention is not to flirt or to display. Several of my female participants talked about what other people would see as an issue with talking to me as a non-Muslim man, but what they saw as perfectly fine and a good example of belonging in Britain. Both Julia and Hannah, for instance, talked about being able to sit opposite a guy without flirting and lusting over him. Amal, before the recording began, talked about how she found it ridiculous (with eyes rolling) that others wouldn’t want to participate and be interviewed for the reason it involved being with a non-Muslim man. In these ways, the control of modesty is made as much an internal process firmly situated in a cultural context as one in which social interactions are regulated. Along similar lines to the above, Richard, for instance, talked about self-control rather than avoidance with reference to alcohol and not staying away from old friends because they drink.

Far less trivial examples often related to the treatment of women and social justice. Rachel notices aspects of control a friend's husband exerted that "reeked of almost sort of abusive", restricting the cafés they would go in or when she could go out without him, using the cloak of it being 'Islamic'. For many the claims to universality are not only part of claims to belong but are also linked to social justice "not just for Islam but for all people" as Angela put it. Likewise, Kate remarked that following Islam is not "like sitting in a cocoon doing things for ourself".

It is not, therefore, simply a matter of patterning society and interactions to avoid undesirable situations, although aspects of this are present, but about cultivating the self in a way that is both in a sense deeper than mere avoidance, and at the same time being able to belong as a result. Along these lines they may challenge women's exclusion from mosque and the reasons given for it as "excuses" with "a strange logic" to quote Matthew. Rosie related realizing that there were no women recorded on her ex-husband's family tree, "I was just like, 'do not play with me when it comes to deleting me from history, dude. What the heck!' And I just remember thinking, I can't do this culture". Avoidance, especially when it goes too far as a form of unnecessary and even unhealthy gender segregation (although the exact line for this will vary), is seen as culturally alien to Britain and to their lives. As cultural outsiders, this might even be seen as something against the religion. For Rachel: "My view is it's a man telling me I can't pray to God [, and] he has no right to do that whatsoever".

This is also reflected in the idea of the *umma*. It has been suggested that the *umma* and its promise of a transnational identity and community attracts converts to Islam and is a cornerstone of the universality and this appeal (Roy, 2004; Soutar, 2010). In the narratives here, the *umma* is an ideal, and the divisions within 'the Muslim community' are lamented, but my participants seem all too aware of the disconnect between the ideal and reality. The *umma* is not a romanticized actuality or even potentiality, but is something that is tied to the core of the Islamic message and *religiosity*, but unrealised in *religion*. Rachel, one of the few to even explicitly mention the *umma*, in fact rejects being "just part of the *umma*" as this means being lost in a sea of cultural codes and practices to which she cannot relate.

It is thus that their concern is a way of being able to be Muslim in Britain, in their local area, in their lives. On the idea of community, for example, Gayle emphasizes this local sense, "If I hear any of my neighbours in that respect have got anything wrong that I physically or emotionally or materialistically can help them with, I am honour bound to try and help". These types of more locally bound contexts of community reflect more general senses of belonging that are not necessarily limited by culture, religion or ethnicity. Evident in these also is a relation to the rejection of 'Saudi', 'Arab', 'Pakistani' and so on, values and culture, where certain aspects of these are seen as anachronistic and out of place in contemporary Britain.

Matthew and Rachel talk about not wanting to go on hajj, despite it being one of the five pillars, for moral political reasons: “well, I don’t particularly want to fund a nasty government and give them lots of money”, remarked Rachel. In this case, adhering to the principles of the faith and the core of its moral message means rejecting one of the pillars of the faith as the two contradict based on a disjuncture between the motivation of *religiosity* and the *religion* of the Saudi government.

As well as the whats of practices, the hows vary along a scale from scornful to generous, and are at least partly dependent on personal experiences of Muslims as far as they may be directed at some but not other Muslim communities. At times, “defending the place of Islam [is achieved] by disassociating it from the stigmatized traditions of immigrant Muslims” (Özyürek, 2015: 5). On more than one occasion a participant admitted to being ‘slightly racist’, and I heard many things which would normally be considered as such. On one occasion, when standing in the street outside a café, Gayle began openly talking about how “Pakistani dress” (referring to a group of women around 50 yards ahead of us) doesn’t belong in the UK and was impractical.

Positioning oneself as a cultural outsider is not always restricted to acts or practices but can be more pervasive and expansive than that, and in this way is linked to how Muslims, or certain ‘cultural’ Muslim communities (Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Somali and so on) can be generalized. In a sense, this is carried over from their pre-Muslim lives and reflects wider discourses of Islamophobia. Richard, as we have seen, talks about a significant period of resistance based on his growing sense of being a Muslim along with his views and perceptions of what that meant socially, “I thought... I’m leaning towards Islam whether I like it or not – and I didn’t particularly like it”.

In the passage below Aakash expresses his feeling of at times being part of a ghetto community. This is not, however, the result of structural factors of discrimination, despite this following him talking about how hard it is being Muslim because of how Muslims are seen in society, but rather the fault of Muslims themselves:

“I don’t necessarily want to be labelled a Muslim [...]. So yeah, it’s stressful err being Muslim can be very stressful. You somehow feel like you’re part of a ghetto community, especially in a place like XXXX where people are not affluent who are Muslims; or people who are Muslims or affluent, they kind of don’t want to associate with Islam anymore. And most of the Muslims are, they live in council estates, they wear burkas or guys wearing these long skirts, you know, they’re called the jubba, and they never seem to go up the ladder in some way. They

don't educate themselves, they're not doctors, they're not PhDs, they're not computer scientists. So that's the part I don't like."

This self-positioning as a cultural outsider is itself a process tightly linked with converts' developing confidence and belonging that comes more readily for some and slowly for others. For both Richard and Hannah what followed their acceptance of Islam was a period of wanting to be on their own and have it to themselves, again highlighting the deeply personal nature of what they were experiencing. This aspect of "retreat[ing] from the community thing and just focuss[ing] on learning", as Angela put it, is an important part of establishing themselves as religious insiders and developing the confidence from which this can be asserted in its relationship with cultural outsidership.

This tactic of protecting oneself from what could be experienced as a cacophony of voices was vital to developing a confident and comfortable sense of belonging and reflects not merely the personal aspect of conversion, but also the cultural and social context in which they are living and negotiating their religious lives. For some, who were not able to develop this sense of negotiated comfort and confidence, and who did conform to pressures from a partner and in-laws, the process was far harder. In one of the most pained passages in any of the narratives, Kamal relates how as a result of changes she made to conform to the practices of her husband and his family she lost one of her sons: He "left home and I think he felt that it was somewhere he couldn't return to, this was not his home anymore. He loved me, he was very close to me, but he lost his mother... And I, if it's the one thing I feel really really bad about that I was just simply taking his mother away from him... I was not a person he recognised anymore. I will always feel bad for that and there's nothing I can do about it".

Other painful experiences that appear include subjugation into domestic life and physical and verbal abuse. For some these are accepted for a while as they are told and believe that 'that is how it is' and they must 'endure' it. As Julia remarked: "you start hearing domestic violence in Muslim families. You think well maybe I'm going through the same thing. Maybe it's supposed to happen like that; maybe it's Islamic". This can create an unbearable pressure to conform if one wishes to maintain one's faith, and there is a distinct gender angle to this where women suffer more than men. It is not exclusive to women, however. Rizwan's narrative was dominated by stories of domestic violence at the hands of his wife, passivity to it from her family and the local community, as well as the police, and references to others with similar experiences. Notably, he invoked the term 'convert abuse' to capture this and put it under a broader umbrella as a particular issue affecting converts, and affecting converts qua converts. In situations such as these, claims to cultural outsidership are not just claims of belonging as this sits in relation to claims of insidership to British society more widely, but can be necessarily a liberational mode of empowerment that enables them to escape a loss of agency or even

cycles of abuse without giving up their faith. It is the realization for some that, as Julia put it, “I could be a Muslim on my own”.

A further feature of this dissonance between religious and cultural, fitting or not within the British context, is captured by Zaara. When recounting her earlier years of being a Muslim, upon discovering a new Muslim circle “it was wonderful. All of a sudden I could relate to people”. Similarly, Adele talks about finding a New Muslim group, which “was very comforting because it was mainly girls that were Christian that had, like that were very similar to me”. Hannah also remarks in reference to a convert friend of hers “we get on so well I think ‘cause she is, she was actually well, yeah, non-Muslim if you know what I mean; sort of English. She was brought up on bacon sandwiches and her mum going out and getting drunk down the pub, and things like... She has those sort of things in her as well”. Katarzyna in fact referred to this as being “culturally secure”. This expression itself points to how they relate as cultural insiders in relation to Britain but as cultural outsiders in relation to Muslim communities, just as their religious insiderness to Islam relates to their religious outsiderness to British society. This points to the felt, emotive aspect of belonging and complex ways in which it is more than simply ‘joining’. Adele, for instance, remarks “Like, I haven’t had any bad experiences that I can think of. But then I don’t feel like I’m accepted as... I dunno. I think there’s definitely something that tells you apart erm, from the Muslim community... you are definitely somebody that’s different”.

Much of this narrating of cultural outsiderness is negative. It focuses on negative, often difficult, experiences, and negative views of certain practices claimed to be Islamic but seen as cultural. But while positioning themselves as cultural outsiders, just as there is scorn and derision at one end of the scale, so too there is generosity and recognition of Muslims as Muslims, and also for what earlier generations have done to establish Islam in Britain at the other. Aakash, quoted above as blaming Muslims rather than discriminatory societal structures goes on to say: “they kind of went into this little bubble of theirs because that’s the best thing they could do. They came here just to look for a better life. Fair enough to them and they have set the foundations of I think for other people to come into Islam like me”. Here then is recognition of both the wider socio-political context as well as important foundations. The we’s and the they’s are far more ambiguous and in fact hold to a universalizing religious principle which allows for disagreement.

Earlier I referred to the positive aspects of the relation of the *stranger* and it is here that we see this most clearly. It is through these dynamics of separating religion from culture and providing a critical take on this relationship, that converts can be seen and I suggest certainly see themselves, as this *stranger*. In this way the common identity under Islam can act not as a list of traits or values, but rather as “conditions for communication” with “a shared fund of

common understandings” (Hylland Eriksen, 2015: 7). Angela in fact notes the “flexibility that Islam erm sets up so that it can operate in a pluralistic world with people of different backgrounds and of different ideas”.

Such a perspective both makes a claim for religious belonging as well as cultural insiderness. It is in fact on these grounds of pluralism that claims of belonging to both Islam and to Britain rest. If we see the relational positioning of the we’s and they’s narratively, their ambiguity is bound up with the negotiations individuals make as they establish, find their way and begin to assert their religious identity and their, and its, place in their life and in society. Muslims may appear as a ‘they’ when the passage functions to criticize and establish the convert’s cultural outsiderhood as a simultaneous mode of opening space for religious insiderhood, but are more likely to be a ‘we’ when establishing the belongingness of religious faith in relation to the secular and the place of Islam and Muslims in Britain more generally on religious grounds. At times, listening to the narratives it’s almost possible to see and feel the struggle with their reaction to the realization that the religious ideal is fraught with division and difficulty whilst at the same time trying to maintain that ideal in outlook; how they both stress the specificities of being a convert whilst striving for a universalist religious disposition.

A number of participants talked about the confusion of being told conflicting things, even when people were ‘well-meaning’. Susanne, for example, talks about becoming aware of differences between culture and religion both through her husband, who is of Bangladeshi background, and meeting other convert women “all married to different cultures”, and who all had different views of things based on what they had been told as a result. For Susanne, “with that I think also a lot of clarity came. It’s a difference between culture and religion. A lot of the things were told to me which are religious, but they’re actually nothing to do with Islam; they’re cultural. And I needed to learn how to separate the two. And of course, as a result of that, I started erm disliking some of the cultural practices and as a result, Muslims”. This was narrated as part of Susanne’s “second cycle”. As part of the third cycle, however, in which she found “my own ways about Islam” she now has “softened” and is “more able to connect with Muslims”. Here we can see the we’s appear, even while retaining the position of *stranger*. She goes on to say that now that “I feel more grounded in my religion and I don’t feel I’m blind to some of the falsehood that we have in the community, so I can now say things I never used to say before... we have to make Islam a modern reality, not an archaic religion that, it’s not a set of dogmas”.

While at times they may appear to be reproducing certain dominant negativised views of Muslims, at other times they rail against such views from wider society. While this may seem a paradox, it must be seen in its place in the narrative. The former is part of carving out a place for themselves as insiders, and often stems from direct experiences of its refusal. It is a claim to

belong to Islam, to be a Muslim and to have an active place, not to just follow but to help shape, to be agentic and be recognized as such. The latter emerges when they are claiming cultural insiderness to that wider society, and in the face of its refusal. This helps hold together variety and disparity along with a sense of wholeness.

We can develop the discussion of the dynamics between the senses of insiderness and outsiderhood through returning to Roy's deculturation. Roy argues "If religions are able to extend beyond their original cultures, it is because they have been able to 'deculturate' themselves" (2010: 7). From our perspective, rather than Islam deculturing itself, however, it is converts as *strangers* who are undertaking this process as part of how belonging is negotiated. Rather than deculturation, we might perhaps be better saying reculturation to capture the process of the religion being remoulded through another cultural framework by converts as active agents. Reculturation also better maintains converts as culturally -embedded subjects rather than seeing them as free of cultural baggage. That is to say, whereas deculturation may refer to a discursive tactic, reculturation refers to a sociological process.

Reculturation has a further advantage in that it can register not just a one-way process in which Britain and British culture (whatever that may be taken to be) processes and repackages Islam. It is not a case of merely what 'British' does to 'Islam'. It is rather about a mutual, intersubjective process in which difference is both preserved, without becoming static, and seen not as a problem but as a solution. Whereas, for Roy, deculturation "transforms the gap between the believer and the non-believer into a barrier, since now they no longer share either religious practice or common values" (2010: 8), we find rather that the connections are cross-cutting and dynamic at the same time as marking difference. However, it is plurality, and Britain's perceived ability to sustain and maintain it, that forms the basis of these claims.

Chapter Summary: the familiarity of the double stranger

"we sort of navigated this whole minefield of, you know, are we British Muslims, are we just Muslims, are we converts, are we New Muslims, are we this, are we that? And we sort of settled into, y'know, we are just us"

The discussion in this chapter has tried to draw out some of the emerging ways in which British converts to Islam position themselves in their socio-cultural context with, following on from chapter 6, specific reference to a sense of religious identity. The quote above from Rosie captures quite nicely some of the questions and issues that converts negotiate as they first try to figure out their place in the social world, before coming round to realizing they are themselves and are of the social world. That is, that are not in-between, but are

intersubjectively constituted between. The key point of being a *stranger* is not a separation from the rest of society but a way of belonging to it. It is through these that they emerge from the wilderness as between, as of society. We can correspondingly see in the narratives of the *stranger* how they draw on a number of existing cultural scripts both 'religious' and 'cultural'.

This, I argue, can help problematize existing conceptions and positionings both in popular and media discourse as well as the academic literature. While there are a number of complex lines, a couple of things begin to emerge more clearly. By positioning themselves as *stranger* converts challenge how they are made doubly strange. By separating religion from culture and arguing that the former is not reducible to the latter, they strive to circumvent their ambiguous presence and open up a space for themselves and their identities that is comfortable and belongs. This is not a matter of a "chosen marginality" (Zebiri, 2008: 193; also Vroon, 2014), but a claim for another way of being of the social world they inhabit. It is with reference to *religiosity* that converts to Islam can at once have their religious identity and with it be viewed and understood in-place. Moreover, it is from here where beginning to unsettle the borders on which converts' exclusions as religious subjects from both secular understandings and Muslim communities rests.

I have suggested that reculturation rather than deculturation better represents the process and dynamics described. The points raised here in relation to this, however, deserve and require greater elaboration. The next chapter turns to do this where a fuller discussion of reculturation and Islamophobia is developed.

Chapter 9: Belonging and Islamophobia

Multiculturalism emerged explicitly in the narratives on a few occasions and these references serve to highlight some of the main issues as they have arisen so far as well as point to the direction taken in this chapter.

Vidya remarks:

“[...] But definitely it [becoming Muslim] wasn't straightforward, at all. It still isn't, still not straightforward. You know what it is? People complicate stuff. People complicate stuff too much; people are just as annoying as hell, my view.

Which people?

Aaah, okay let's get into your multiculturalism now. That's really what it's about. It's not about Islam; it's not about the religion itself. It's about those who practise this religion. That's where the biggest struggles come from. Because I would say on the face of it, it might seem to most people on the outside that there is a collective community of Muslims. And there is; we, you know, we have each other's backs most of the time you know, we all stand together when it matters, when it counts. But it doesn't mean that we don't have our differences. And it doesn't mean that reverts themselves [don't] find themselves in a very sort of difficult position. Because, like most ancient religions, it's very much about how established you are in the religion, and that is usually determined by your lineage in the majority of situations.”

Here, Vidya highlights the uneasy relationship between the personal and the social aspects of conversion. Her passage also shows how 'Muslim' can in certain circumstances be considered a superordinate category. Also, however, she highlights the distinctiveness of converts (here reverts) seeking to reconcile their inner held faith with their social position and relations as a result of the established ethno-cultural/ethno-religious Muslim communities. It is these established forms and how they present difficulties for converts that evoke multiculturalism for her. Multiculturalism comes into the picture when we think about very sociological concerns of groupness and its political and social contextualisation in society.

It is these forms that also prompt the reference to multiculturalism for Matthew, who more directly points to multiculturalism as a divisive factor on the view of the institutional dominance of born Muslim communities in the UK, which consequently leaves little space for converts:

“Erm I mean I’m not gonna say multiculturalism is dead or multiculturalism has always been a bad thing, but I feel like our very lax position on how we’ve dealt with multiculturalism has created this problem. Erm, it’s caused many problems but specifically to me as a Muslim it’s caused this problem inside me [sic] own community, where we’re still very divided upon race erm, and language.”

Rosie, by contrast, highlights a different understanding. For her, the dominant preference is still essentially assimilative, and although multiculturalism has not been given enough space, it may hold out the hope of more pluralistic and inclusive thinking:

“But here [Britain], because you’ve got like this indigenous population that is still the majority, multiculturalism is harder to come to terms with because there is sort of an expectation that you’re going to eventually assimilate.”

These passages from Vidya, Matthew and Rosie highlight a number of the issues that have already been touched upon in previous chapters. These aspects of unity, separation and pluralism highlighted in these three passages form the entry points for the discussion as it proceeds through this chapter. This chapter takes up the issues of identity and belonging that have emerged so far and brings them to bear on multiculturalism’s twin tenets of recognition and difference as a core part of its civic vision.

For multiculturalism, “the appropriate sociological starting point is that of negative difference and the politics consists in seeking to turn the negative into a positive, not the erasure of difference but its transformation into something for which civic respect can be won” (Modood, 2007: 41). For this latter point “the senses of identity groups so perceived have of themselves” (ibid: 37) becomes a key starting point in this task. This is where, as has been argued, multiculturalism offers better conceptual resources than its recent challengers for thinking about diversity and religion. Yet, there are aspects of this framework that obscure rather than help elucidate issues of identity and belonging for British converts to Islam.

Taking its lead from this, this chapter explores in more detail *religiosity* as the site of negative difference. It, therefore, reflects on the fact that Modood, in formulating his civic multiculturalism, argued for a multiculturalism that “brings together rather than drives apart ethnicity and religion” (2007: 35). On the one hand, this registers the entanglement of the two and the process of ethnicization. On the other hand, however, a conflation between the two found in the terms ethno-religious and ethno-cultural is problematic. This is especially so for converts, who put forward a discourse of attempting to drive the two apart. Through an

engagement with the dialectical hinge between ascribed identities and personal senses of self, the chapter explores the implications of *religiosity* as the substance of *difference* to address positions on Islamophobia in relation to converts. We have seen how converts face different forms of discrimination, how they can experience Islamophobia as well as discrimination from born Muslims, and also how they can reproduce forms of Islamophobic discourse. The relationship between these is explored in detail. This discussion establishes the grounds on which the negative difference of converts can be turned into a positive in a way which preserves both the unity and pluralism evident from Vidya's and Rosie's passages above.

It also considers challenges that are necessarily part of this process and that arise when thinking about converts as well as for converts themselves. This addresses two important lines of discussion. The first is the issue of reculturation and how this process relates to Muslim communities and Islamophobia. The second expands the discussion out to the relationship between the religious and secular more broadly.

Muslim and convert identities

Within literature on multiculturalism in Britain the category 'British Muslim' generally refers to those who were born Muslim; that is, born into a Muslim family who emigrated to Britain, or are the children, grandchildren (and so on) of migrants. As such, the framework, explicitly or implicitly, is based on a migration background with British Muslims resultingly being conceptualised as an ethno-cultural or ethno-religious minority. Such an 'ethnic lens' is also apparent in social-psychology research on multiculturalism and identity (see, for example, Schwartz et al., 2014 and Berry & Sam, 2014). As Roy comments, "Islam in the West has been systematically researched through the lenses of sociology of immigration and ethnic studies" (Roy, 2004: 103). Along these lines of seeing Muslims in 'ethnic' terms, it has in fact been suggested that "a White British convert... undergoes the 'immigrant experience' of having to integrate into a society in which, paradoxically, [s/]he is already culturally a part" (Suleiman, 2015: 6). This has a common-sense appeal, yet on closer inspection can serve to obscure particular aspects of converts' experiences. As Roy continues, "Such an approach was legitimate in terms of history, but ignores the growing discrepancy between the forms taken by Islam in the West and in the cultures of origin" (Roy, 2004: 103). Many converts of course are not immigrants. Others, especially those of Hindu or Sikh background, may have immigration backgrounds although not be immigrants themselves.

Some converts are immigrants, European or non-, having moved to Britain either long- or short-term. These converts may have converted either before or after coming to Britain¹³. They will

¹³ See Krotofil, 2011, for discussion of Polish migrants who have converted to Islam.

have all gone through an immigrant experience, albeit of different kinds. This would be so, however, not in relation to their being Muslim. They would also fall outside the scope of the analogy quoted above, which references only white British converts. What is more intriguing, and I suggest more illuminating, are precisely those reasons converts are *not* undergoing the immigrant experience. It is this, moreover, that suggests the fruitfulness of employing Simmel's conception of the *stranger*. Through the discussion of the religion-culture divide, which forms such a central framework of convert narratives, converts offer both a conceptual and empirical challenge to this way of thinking about Muslims and Islam in Britain today.

While converts' organisational or institutional affiliations, lifestyle patterns, friendship groups and so on may change, many of my participants continue to live, work, play, walk, take public transport, shop and so on in the country, city, town or village in which they did all those things prior to their conversion. It is precisely this that can cause much of the difficulty. The places, buildings, roads, faces, routes, language and so on have not changed. Nevertheless, the ways they feel, relate and react to them, and are felt and reacted to by them or within them, have. This is why, for example, Kate is looking forward to moving away to university:

"So that's why I chose [name of university], 'cause nobody knows me there. So, if I go there, none of my family and my friends are there, so if they see me, they're not gonna think 'oh look there's Kate, she's a Muslim'. It's like people I don't know, so when they meet me, they're gonna know that I was Muslim, they're gonna think that I was born Muslim. So that's less issues for me 'cause I don't have to explain myself."

Furthermore, patterns of discrimination and Islamophobia are markedly different. While experiencing discrimination in many ways similar to born Muslims, converts also face discrimination of different kinds, as suggested by the trope of 'betrayal' in the discriminatory discourse from non-Muslims, family and friends – a betrayer is after all an insider rather than an outsider. This is especially true for white converts when we look beyond the family because of the importance of the visible in these forms of discrimination where Islam and Muslims are framed as 'Other' in the national context. For converts of Hindu or Sikh background, the betrayal links to politics of ethnic and religious relations more directly related to India, Bangladesh and Pakistan (although Britain is not historically unimplicated here either), as was noted in the previous chapter in relation to Simran. 'Betrayal' again speaks of the entanglement of ethnicity, culture and religion in regard to Islam. It represents not just the view of the foreignness of these three, but also the perception of threat seen as inherent in them. As indicated in Vidya and Rosie's passages above, they can be British Muslims where this is conceived broadly, including various patterns of believing and belonging. Nevertheless, they face discrimination of both a different feel and sort. The Islamophobia they face from non-

Muslims can be different precisely because they are not undergoing the 'immigrant experience'. In addition, they also face discrimination from born Muslims and Muslim communities. It is these issues of Islamophobia and discrimination that the sections that follow turn to.

Islamophobia and involuntary identities

“How you view Islamophobia depends upon how you view Islam”

Salma Yaqoob, quoted in Birt (2013: 217)

Islamophobia has been a much-debated concept ever since it gained popular currency following the Runnymede Trust Report *Islamophobia: A Challenge for us All* (1997)¹⁴. The term has, for instance, been accused of doing nothing to dispel the homogenising distortion of there being *an* Islam in a way that may reduce the possibility of a distinction between constructive, dialogic criticism and discrimination in a similar way to the risk of being accused of anti-Semitism if critical of Israeli government policy (Halliday, 1999; cf Klug, 2014). Yet it does not necessarily follow that a term meant to capture the nature of discrimination, its overlapping logics entwining Islam as a faith, Muslims as ‘a people’ and ‘their’ cultural practices, automatically homogenises those discriminated against. On the contrary, the term in fact registers the homogenising tendency of the discrimination without necessarily denying diversity within Islam.

Debates on the term have been much rehearsed since, and it is not my intention to reproduce them all here (see Halliday, 1999; Miles & Brown, 2003; Rana, 2007; Sayyid & Vakil, 2011; Allen, 2010; Grosfoguel, 2012; Jackson, 2018). Rather, I wish to focus on one particular aspect, that of how the religious fits into the picture. Much of this contestation has centred around discrimination against Muslims having often fallen outside the purview of anti-racism protections on the basis that theirs is a religious, and therefore a chosen or ‘voluntary’ identity (Meer, 2008). The core of this objection is that it is not possible to be racist against a set of ideas and that a religion should not be protected from such criticism. Halliday (1999), for instance, in his well-known critique, argued that while it may be appropriate to characterise past forms (such as the crusades) as against Islam as a religion, contemporary discrimination is not aimed at Islam as a faith or even as a culture but at Muslims as a people. Halliday argues, therefore, that while Islamophobia may be appropriate to characterise past forms, the term

¹⁴ For earlier uses and discussions see Said’s (1985), in Vakil (2011); Rana (2007), who traces the term to the 1970s; Modood’s (1991), in Allen (2010); also Lockett & Jelen (2017), who trace its use back to 1923; and Sian (2013), who traces its first usage to 1918 in French.

'anti-Muslimism' is more accurate to describe our present context (for historical cross overs see also Medovoi, 2012).

However, in part recognising these entanglements, and in part registering the different character of Islamophobia from forms of biological racism, Islamophobia captures a form of 'cultural racism'. In fact, Modood comments that "we really only begin to talk about multiculturalism when the groups in question cannot be characterized in 'racial' terms only" (2007: 40-41). By emphasising ethnicity and the cultural logic of racism, this conception has distinguished it from earlier (or current) anti-racism scholarship, the focus of which is on the racial dualism of 'colour racism' (Modood, 2009b). A definition of Islamophobia as 'anti-Muslim racism' which registers these overlapping logics has come to be the most widely accepted understanding of the term in Britain¹⁵. This points to how Islamophobia functions and produces effects in ways similar to other forms of racism (Meer & Modood, 2010).

These points, however, have meant that religion as one of the 'logics' of Islamophobia has more often than not been side-lined on the basis of its supposed voluntariness. This side-lining becomes important not least because as part of this entanglement religion may be used to incite racial hatred (Meer, 2008; also Modood, 2007; Jackson, 2018). Jones et al. note how there has been a discursive switch from 'race' to Islam as a faith, which has emerged as an 'acceptable' form of anxiety about Muslims and continued to reproduce discourses of Islam as scripturally deterministic (Jones et al., 2018). It is this, they argue, that is now structurally important to Islamophobia and serves to normalise it, indicating the religious logic of the discriminatory discourse is becoming more prominent. That is, as discriminatory discourses highlighting race have become less socially acceptable as grounds for open forms of discrimination, the discourse has switched to religion as a form which is acceptable and "has now passed the dinner-table test" (Warsi, 2011; Jones et al., 2018: 14). Studies which suggest, for example, religious as well as ethnic penalties in areas such as the labour market can also be seen to suggest this aspect of context and manifestation of Islamophobia (for example, Khattab and Modood, 2015). Taking this along with the centrality of religious subjectivity as has been argued in preceding chapters, there is a clear need for a more thorough exposition of the religious within the framework of multiculturalism as a site of negative difference, the sense converts have of their own identity, and how this may be transformed into something positive for which civic respect can be won.

¹⁵ This general acceptance is evident in the publication of the recent Runnymede Trust report *Islamophobia: Still a Challenge for Us All* (2017), which has adopted this definition.

Muslim as an involuntary identity

It is necessary to begin by questioning the apparently common-sense understanding of the 'voluntariness' of religious identity on which such discriminatory discourses are justified. Meer (2008, 2010; see also Modood, 2007/2013, 2009b) has offered a category of 'Muslim' that is quite rightly broad and sociological, rather than narrowly scriptural. It is 'quasi-ethnic' on the basis that this is more inclusive of self-identifications, which may be based on various, and not necessarily solely religious, factors. This holds together the fact that Muslim can be a negatively ascribed identity as the site of discrimination, as well as the basis of claims made by Muslims, which may mirror claims made by other ethnic groups. Thus: "*when a Muslim identity is mobilized, it should not be dismissed because it is an identity of personal choice, but rather understood as a mode of classification according to the particular kinds of claims Muslims make for themselves, albeit in different and potentially contradictory ways*" (Meer, 2008: 67, italics in original; also Fatima, 2011). The 'chosenness' or 'voluntariness' of the identity 'Muslim' is tied up with the dialectic between social structure and our personal sense of self. Viewed this way, the voluntariness of the identity dissolves.

The voluntariness of religious identity as it pertains more specifically to converts can appear more pronounced, however. For Meer, "although one may imagine a Muslim identity in different ways, *when one is born into a Muslim family, one becomes Muslim*" (Meer, 2008: 67, italics added), and it is this which forms the dialectic between structure and Muslims' personal senses of self. Along these lines, nevertheless, converts do seem to choose their religious identity, and therefore the category identity Muslim, which forms the mode against which they are discriminated. It appears clearer in the case of converts that they choose the identity Muslim in a way which would leave them outside of this foundational aspect of the argument.

On the one hand then, Meer's open categorization clearly has scope to include converts when it comes to mobilization and claims. There are clear similarities and overlaps in the way they are ethnicised in Islamophobic discourses. On the other, however, taking the basis on which their Muslim identity is sociologically involuntary, they seem to fall outside of its scope. This is because if converts' identities as Muslims are seen as 'voluntary' as a result of being converts, they would still fall under the logic of "advocating that those subject to discrimination or hostility should choose, where possible, to change their identity in order to avoid discrimination" (Meer, 2008: 77). In fact Özyürek notes how "political figures who argue against recognizing Islamophobia as a form of racism frequently bring out the example of converts to Islam" (2015: 376).

Aside from arguing that the position of these identities as voluntary results in "invit[ing] the tyranny of the majority and contravenes liberal conception[s] of individualism, freedom of

conscience and expression” (Meer, 2008: 77), a significant argument itself, there is another way to challenge the idea of converts’ ‘voluntary’ religious identities, and one which relates to the matter that I have spent much time discussing up to now – the centrality of *religiosity* as a mode of being. Challenging the ‘voluntariness’ of religious identity on its own terms is also salient when we remember that the focus for multiculturalism is to take people’s sense of identity as such. This represents an argument beginning from the ‘other end’ to Meer’s, although one ultimately compatible with it.

Religiosity and involuntary identity

On the one hand, converts can be seen to choose Islam. They make a deliberate change, often following and based on having explored other options. Many emphasise that it was a choice. This emphasis, however, requires unpacking. In part it may reflect a broader context which stresses rational, individual choice. Moreover, the emphasis on choice arises precisely as a need to challenge denigrating assumptions about their *religiosity*, based on the views of Islam as oppressive and of limiting choice, of a general perception of conversions of convenience as explaining why someone would choose to convert to Islam, and thereby also denigrating the choice as a religious choice, and so on. Here then, an emphasis on choice is an assertion of agency and a retort to discourses which may denigrate their conversion. It attests to their seriousness, their intelligence, research and rationality. It is also an assertion of the deeply and sincerely held personal *religiosity* and belief in Islam and against this being seen in restricted ‘ethnic’ terms.

A further aspect of problematizing the idea of ‘choice’ arises when we look at the dynamics between continuity and change. The ontology of *religiosity* strongly suggests that choice conceived in terms where it can be straightforwardly unchosen denigrates the depth of this as a mode of being. It is in fact something very real. Therefore, when we take this aspect seriously, we find the element of choice itself becomes fuzzier. The experiences of discrimination, the self-doubt, the resistance, the dissonance that have been described in previous pages also speak of the impelling aspect of this *religiosity* and serve to make far fuzzier a concept of choice which suggests they could or even should just give it up, walk away, believe in something else. It is on the grounds of *religiosity*, and *religiosity* faced often with more obstacles than openings, that the involuntariness of converts’ identities as Muslim can be made.

Given these two, the structural shift in Islamophobia and the centrality of *religiosity* as a mode of being, it seems that a better understanding of and conversation about religion is needed. This is not a position that is proposing a change in the definition of Islamophobia. This definition

is rightly sociological and founded on the dialectic between personal senses of self, social structures and discriminatory discourses. It is, however, a position that calls for prejudices about belief and ontologies and epistemologies of belief to be part of sociological conversations in a way they have so far not been.

This argument is also important to make not merely for the sake here, but also when we consider the place of Islamic religious subjectivities more generally and as they pertain to converts in relation to born Muslims. The former will be returned to towards the end of this chapter. The following section turns to the second of these and picks up a thread from the previous chapter where I noted how an important aspect in converts' narratives of belonging was how they distanced themselves from born-Muslim communities along the culture axis; where, that is, their narratives of belonging could reproduce aspects of the wider discourses of Islamophobia.

Islamophobia and Eurocentrism

In the previous chapter it was noted that through the religion-culture separation, one way in which converts establish belonging in relation to Britain reproduces common cultural prejudices about Muslims and 'their' cultural practices. In her study of German converts to Islam, Özyürek argues that "in trying to attain this pure Islam and save Islam from its negative associations... the idealized untainted Islam they promote leaves... immigrant Muslims... to bear the full brunt of the racialized stigma of Islam" (2015: 68), a position earlier and similarly noted in reference to Italy (Salih, 2004). This proposes then that converts are not only on the receiving end of Islamophobia but are also complicit in a form of Eurocentrism which reproduces the processes through which Muslims are ethnicized¹⁶. Özyürek posits this as a paradox and argues that:

"prevalent ideas of secularism that define religion as a sphere separate from all other social realities combined with the increased racialization of Muslims prompt converts along with some other European-born Muslims to promote an Islam that can be rescued from its association with the despised aspects of Middle Eastern values and practices, and shown to be fit for European minds and lives... an inclusion of Islam into Europe comes at the expense of a simultaneous exclusion of racialized Muslims from it" (2015: 132-133).

¹⁶ It is in fact Islamophobia as Eurocentrism that forms its central dynamic for one commentator, where the "global dimension of Islamophobia can be understood as an expression of resurgent Eurocentrism" (Jackson, 2018: 146).

Despite the apparent overlaps between this position and findings from my participants' narratives, this requires unpacking in relation to the analysis presented so far. This is because the foundation of Özyürek's position itself subordinates and side-lines religion in relation to ethnicity. It is in fact thus that she states "it is safe to conceptualize white Muslim stigmatization of immigrant background Muslims as both racist and Islamophobic" (in Mandel et al., 2015: 377). In the following sections I unpack and explore this position along intersecting lines. Firstly, I offer a sociological response to the issue of conversion, picking up the discussion of deculturation and reculturation from the previous chapter as a starting point. Secondly, I unpack the character of converts' Islamophobic discourse as it emerges in the narrative, showing how it relates more directly to the concern with ethnicization and reculturation. I then go on to problematize Özyürek's conclusion by offering an alternative, although not mutually exclusive, interpretative line of discussion related to *religiosity*. This then raises challenges at the intersections of different societal levels as well as the particular epistemological lens we bring to the issue.

Deculturate or reculturate: a sociological response

In the previous chapter we saw how deculturation claims can and do function as a tactic of belonging and that certain aspects of Islamophobic discourse are reproduced in convert narratives, a couple of my participants even quietly admitting to 'occasional and slight racism'. I also argued that we are better off thinking about converts as reculturating rather than deculturating with regard to Islam in Britain in order to register firstly, their agency as Muslims and as part of Islam as a living, dynamic religious tradition, and secondly, their own cultural embeddedness.

In addressing the paradox identified above we have to begin by firstly recognising that converts reculturate rather than deculturate because they *must* reculturate. This is a sociological truism despite discourse that emphasises the contrary, including that of my participants. After all, Muslim identity has been, is, will and can only be "shaped in dialogue with its context" (Meer, 2008: 65). Therefore, any supposition that converts would not, by force of sociological necessity, offer different, and differing, interpretations and understandings of Islam, is considerably lacking. Seeing religious conversion to Islam purely or merely as a form of "intellectual appropriation of the 'other'", as does Mandel in a response to Özyürek's book (Mandel et al., 2015: 363; for a similar point, Mossiere, 2016), constitutes its own form of essentialism. Thus construed, Islam could only ever be a parochial ethnic religion of certain people and any universalistic religious claims would dissolve. Were this the outlook of the religious tradition itself, conversion in this instance would be far harder, and one would have to assume more tightly regulated, as is the case for conversion to Orthodox Judaism, for

example. This, then, makes the category error of reducing and confining religion to an aspect of ethnic identity, and also failing to appreciate the myriad places and ways in which Islam is followed throughout the world and has been throughout history. As we saw in the previous chapter with reference to Saoirse, it is claims like these at times made by born Muslims that can deny converts' religious subjectivity.

Having established the sociological inevitability of reculturation, what becomes more significant is how converts reculturate Islam. Of course, Özyürek's position can still stand at this point, for the answer may well be 'by reproducing Islamophobic discourse'. Converts' own suggestions of deculturation might attest to this. In what follows, however, I want to problematize this 'how' a little further. What I want to suggest is that there is also another story to be told here that must run alongside the one of converts reproducing Islamophobic discourse. This story is not a replacement for the one outlined above but overlaps with it. This is not meant in any way to deny the salience of the argument that converts' reproduce aspects of Islamophobic discourse. It is, rather, to suggest that this conclusion proceeds from a particular lens and framework of interpretation. A line of analysis consistent with my arguments as they have been developing so far offers an alternative interpretation. The broad argument is that centralising and taking seriously the religious aspect shifts the lens and allows us to unpick the apparent paradox.

The site of difference

In line with a multiculturalism approach, it is important to start by defining the terms on which difference is here being seen. In line with the emphasis on the relational in the previous two chapters, we can bring in a view of difference which is not based on "otherness, exclusive opposition, but specificity, variation, heterogeneity" and is rather "a function of the relations between groups and the interaction of groups with institutions [...] a social process of interaction and differentiation in which some people come to have a particular *affinity*" (Young, 1990/2011: 171-172, emphasis in original). From this angle converts' reculturation need not be seen simply as a boundary of exclusion between racialized bodies which opposes converts on the one hand to born Muslims on the other. This is because it allows the site on which difference is conceived to be placed on the religious rather than the ethnic. This marks an important conceptual and interpretive shift with implications for theorising difference.

From this perspective, I want to begin by suggesting, in keeping with and building on the discussions throughout this thesis so far, that 'the shared criterion' of *religiosity* as a categorical boundary distinct from categorisation based on ethnicity needs to be considered for these concerns. These categorical boundaries do of course intersect, and this will be brought out, but the argument is that this deserves analytical attention itself. From this starting position Islam is,

rather than restricted to a site of ethnic contestation, a shared area of “conditions for communication” with “a shared fund of common understandings” (Hylland Eriksen, 2015: 7). This is to recognize that “the Qu’ran offers guidance that is interpreted and applied by human agents. This means that different accounts of scripturally informed Muslim identities can exist without necessarily invalidating each other” (Meer, 2008: 65).

The historical spread of Islam has, of course, always resulted in variance in interpretation and practice. The aim of this interpretive shift is to strike a more coherent sociological balance between political and religious categories. This alternative, I suggest, better fits converts’ self-understanding and better fits claims of Islam as being a universalisable religion - an argument shared with born Muslims and evident in the ease of the conversion process. It also helps contextualise converts alongside second and third generation Muslims and their own struggles in Britain by bringing a multi-level view into conversation of personal and social identity formation processes, organisational and institutional arrangements, and wider discourses.

To do so we can begin to bring into the conversation in a more central way the tension and conflict converts often feel in relation to born Muslims through returning to the continuum of attitudes towards Muslims expressed in converts’ narratives, sliding between aspects of Islamophobic discourse and greater generosity. This scale, significantly, is not one between different convert narratives, but within convert narratives. This generosity itself can be seen as resulting from the *religiosity* that activates this form of interaction. In other words, generosity in this regard can itself be viewed within the scope of converts’ developing Islamic subjecthood as this attitude is held to be a core aspect of such a religious subjectivity. It is thus that they reflexively negotiate this at times with greater ease and at times with greater struggle in the context of dominant discourses and facing discrimination from born Muslims. That is to say that this particular expression of *religiosity* is concordant with their more general developing religious subjectivity. The following sections will take up these issues.

To take stock before expanding this discussion, we can briefly consider the following extract from Angela:

“And as I said I think, I think people here erm are largely culturally Muslim. I think it’s starting to change now, you know. I’ve spoken to a lot of young, especially young mid-generation Muslims erm either Arab or Pakistani, who have said ‘I’m really only just learning about Islam now.’ Erm and I think young Muslims are starting to take their religion very seriously and trying to separate their religion from their culture. So I quite like, I quite like working with young Muslims as well, actually. I think they’ve got a lot of energy. Erm I think ‘cause they are Muslims really seeking justice not just for Islam but for all people. Erm I actually

have a lot of, a lot of hope err yeah in those young Muslims. But I think in the, I think the older generations of Muslims think they came here perhaps as economic immigrants. They didn't wanna stand out, they didn't wanna be talking about their faith, they didn't wanna come across as someone different to anyone else. They just wanted to go to work support their family, get on with their day, so they didn't necessary talk about their Islam. Erm it's something very very private. But in that I think it created a vacuum erm where people didn't really know what Islam was 'cause no-one talked about, erm, and maybe just practiced our Islam as we did back in wherever. Erm but I think that's changing now for the young generation that were born here. They want to understand their faith. They wanna, they wanna live it and act it out in their society. And they're not ashamed actually to say yeah I am Muslim and this is what it means to me."

We see here the religion-culture distinction, the connection to young Muslims who are negotiating a similar dialectic between faith and society, and a sympathetic portrayal of the circumstances of older generations along with some reflections on why Islam has taken this shape in Britain, as well as also reference to how this is changing. Crucially, we can also see how this is understood in terms of faith. These sentiments are present in several narratives, where my participants appear to be sympathetic to the position Muslims found themselves in when they moved to Britain and faced mass prejudice. Although with different interpretations of what this meant for Islam, this aspect of the more generous spirit seems to suggest that it is now time for Islam to assert itself on religious terms.

Decategorisation in relation to non-Muslims

The attempt at a greater balance between political, sociological and religious categorisation presents an interesting dynamic for this discussion. What we find is that in the face of decategorisation in relation to non-Muslims, converts stress their belonging to 'Muslim' as a superordinate category, inclusive of the sociological range in Meer and Modood's conceptualisations.

This appears in two main ways. One is when they may feel they are being separated from the category 'Muslim' by non-Muslims, especially if this is based on a narrow ethno-religious perception of 'Muslim'. The following passage from Angela's narrative captures this. Angela had fostered a high number of young asylum seekers over the years and was known at the local school. Given this long-standing relationship, although the school did not want to take any more asylum seekers, it agreed to do so for Angela. Here she describes taking a new boy to

register at the school and expresses her frustration at the teacher's apparent attempt to draw her back into a non-Muslim group of 'us':

"So erm she must have heard, the teacher must have heard that I'd converted to Islam. So, I went up to the school with the new boy, with scarf on obviously, and she came out the door, the teacher from the unit, and just went, 'Ahhhhh, oh my! I didn't realise you'd gone so far as to veil yourself'. I'm, 'What? Veil myself!' And it was like this [gestures to scarf she's wearing] you know, not here [gesturing her face], not nothing like that you know. I don't wear niqab. [derisively] Veil yourself! ... She went, just to make matters worse she went, 'Can I have a quick word? I'm going to take him. Yes, I'll take him for you but you do know I've got 13 of them?' '13 of *them*?' '13... Muslims' she went. Okay then, Muslims, *what's that*?! And I'm sitting here. [She's] just complained at me being 'veiled' and [then] she's gone 'Muslims'. Wow! And I'm like wow, wow what is that about?! Is she...? I almost had a sense of she was trying to get me back in her group."

A further way in which converts may resist the disaggregation of the sociological category Muslim can be seen to reflect what Birt has referred to as a 'community of suffering' (Birt, 2013). This passage from Gayle captures an instance of this. She is recounting a trip to London to visit her son shortly after the 7/7 bombings, when, upon arriving, and under pressure from her son, she removed her headscarf in order to pass through the streets unharassed:

"Feeling very miserable [about having removed her scarf] I went with my son in the tube. About four or five stops along some poor err Muslim guy got in with his dinner, obviously 'cause you could smell it, a kebab or something, and everybody in the carriage was glaring at him. And it just was too much for me. I started to cry. And my son said, 'What's the matter?' I said 'He's up there being who he is. I should be sat next to him getting those evil looks and I'm hiding who I am.' (...) I said, 'I feel I'm hiding who I am. It's not that I need to wear this but I choose to and I'm now, because of what's happened in this city, hiding who I am. I'm pretending I'm not who I am. And I find that seeing somebody else getting the venom that I know would come my way makes me feel so ashamed of myself."

Following this, she did put her headscarf back on, with the compromise for her son that she would remove it in place of a hood on the street where he lived to protect him from harassment; this after overhearing a vitriolic conversation from the neighbours' garden about Muslims.

In instances such as these converts explicitly 'have each other's backs' as Muslims, displaying solidarity with suffering even where they could, and should so the voluntary identity logic would tell us, disavow such solidarity. This is especially so when they could, in theory, avoid the visible display and expression of it, thereby decategorising themselves so as not to be seen as Muslims by others. It might be remembered from the previous chapter that aspects of Gayle's interview and its telling were among the most forthright and explicit in their reproduction of aspects of Islamophobic discourse. Yet in this instance we find her expressing a solidarity when she would appear to have a number of ways of justifying its avoidance. She is demonstrably not leaving "immigrant Muslims... to bear the full brunt of the racialized stigma of Islam". Importantly here also, in light of the above discussion on the involuntariness of converts' religious identities, is that a lack of such solidarity in this instance is deeply felt as an instance of hiding 'who she is'. 'Who she is' in this instance is not just a personal matter of *religiosity* but becomes a matter of sociological and political identity.

This points to an ambiguity that we can also see in this passage, also from Gayle's narrative:

"There were some negatives of course. Erm, sisters who spent all the time criticising how I stood, how I walked, how I prayed, how de, de, de, de, err, you know. But still... and often the groupie attitude of some of the Muslims as well. 'Oh, I'm a revert. Oh she's gonna give me blessings that I need to be close to her stuff'. But on the whole I found my position in a community and I felt very comfortable and happy doing stuff (...) the usefulness of being English, not young, a woman, confident now, cos I was nowhere near what I was before, err able to speak, able to articulate, able to put things they needed into practice with City Council, with police with all kinds of err companies and forums and things like this."

Both ends of the continuum are evident here, and Gayle, in another part of the interview, also reflected on how being 'old' and 'white' meant that she could get away with saying critical things to city Mayors and Lords and was happy to act as a representative of local Muslim communities – a recognition of her relative privilege and ability to use it as such, despite what she may have lost in this regard as a result of becoming Muslim. The ambiguity evident here and at work across different societal levels is further explored in the following section.

Decategorisation in relation to Muslims

Whereas in certain circumstances and contexts they may appeal to this broader category of 'Muslim', at other times they will disaggregate it and stress difference rather than unity in relation to 'Muslim'.

It is important to recall at this point that their conversion challenges such pre-existing perceptions as they held prior to coming to Islam. It is worth bearing in mind also that for the vast majority of converts, their initial contact, interest and influence in Islam came from some form of contact with and example of Muslims, whether through an individual, witnessing prayer, or experiences in a Muslim majority country. There is a clear sense of wrestling with the negative hegemonic discourse through the realisation that it is a negative hegemonic discourse that needs to be challenged, while also reconciling this with discrimination they face from Muslims upon their conversion (see also Guimond, 2017). It is not merely a case of acceptance and reproduction but rather reflects a complex dynamic of the crossing points between a hegemonic discourse, personal faith, and experiences both positive and negative of interactions with Muslims leading up to and following conversion.

The important point here is that aspects of dominant Islamophobic discourse are reproduced a) following having gone some way to reconcile the tension felt between their sense of *religiosity* and this discourse as it colours their prior perceptions of Muslims and Islam more broadly, b) as a reaction against exclusion and discrimination from Muslims, and c) in the context of this experience, trying to stake a claim for belonging in Islam. This itself suggests that not only is it necessary to make the case for British converts to Islam's religious identity as involuntary in relation to wider debates about discrimination in society, but so too it is important in relation to Muslim communities. This emphasises the intersection of how these more micro- and median-power dynamics meet the macro. In terms of belonging to a broad sociological category of 'Muslim' they face discrimination from wider society based on being included in this category, owing to macro-level discourses of Islamophobia. They also face discrimination from born Muslims based on excluding them from this category. In this context, they stress the particularity of converts and the centrality of *religiosity* as an alternative to the broader purely sociological category.

Existing discourses of prejudice against Muslims, and those they may have held but displaced within their own perceptions, can resurface in these circumstances. This itself is reflective of the pervasiveness and power of the hegemonic position in society of Islamophobic discourses. Here, not being born Muslim can form the basis of exclusion and refusal of claims to belong. While a non-Muslim majority may try to deny quasi-ethnic Muslim claims on grounds of them being made by what is perceived to be a (voluntary) religious identity category, Muslims may deny converts' religious claims on the grounds of them being made from the position of an alternative ethnic or other-religious category. That is, the discrimination that converts face from Muslims is against the involuntary ethnic identity, which often eclipses their *religiosity*. The terms religious and spiritual abuse used by a few participants of different ethnic and religious backgrounds were made in reference to this discrimination. This more strongly necessitates the

need to assert the involuntariness of religious identity, and of difference as it pertains to British converts to Islam on the alternative basis of *religiosity*.

There are further reasons to consider this more carefully and from the alternative interpretive position explored here. Distinguishing between religion and culture in the ways described here is, importantly, not exclusive to converts. It is also part of the discourse of many young Muslims as they search for a way between their faith, their upbringing and lives in Britain and their different outlooks from their parents about how these fit together (Jacobson, 1997; Gilliat-Ray, 2010; also Duderija, 2007).

Moreover, the critique is not exclusively aimed at born Muslims. It can in fact be both directed at converts as well as born Muslims. Richard, for example, dressed in blue jeans and a blue hoody, contrasted himself to other converts who had started wearing *thawb*, grown beards and adopted other aspects perceived as 'traditional' of Islam upon conversion. In addition, converts as a category are ethnically diverse and this discourse of separation is consistent across narratives no matter the ethnic or religious background of the individual convert.

Converts themselves do not seem to disaggregate the category convert in the same way they might the broader category 'Muslim'. Whereas 'Muslim' may be separated two ways, the first along the religion-culture divide and the second along ethnic group lines, the category 'convert' tends to only be separated along the religion-culture divide. Converts who are perceived to be merely cultural (such as conversions of convenience or those who fully adopt 'cultural' behaviours, forms of dress and so on, perceived to be at the expense of religious reasons) come in for similar critique as born Muslims along these lines – and this is so regardless of ethnic background. We can see this in the following quote from Katarzyna, for example, which chimes consistently across the narratives: "Erm yeah so, there is a lot of challenges for sure being a Muslim nowadays does bring. But unless people like us, and I'm not saying just reverts, people who erm understand these, these values [universality of the religious and its separation from the cultural] and understand the importance of it, unless we really start trading the dialogue around that, you know, nothing will change".

In fact, where a distinction between white, black and South-Asian converts is made by converts themselves, this is to draw attention to the difference in patterns of discrimination they face from others and not to disaggregate the category 'convert' along ethnic lines. This difference in experience based on ethnic background is also an aspect mentioned by converts of all backgrounds. To begin to understand this we need to appreciate that converts do not experience discrimination from other converts in the way in which they frequently do in relation to Muslim communities. The disaggregation of categories can therefore be seen as directly

related to those patterns of discrimination which they face upon conversion and the balances of power in society.

What is also fundamental to note here is that many of the points on which converts challenge born Muslims, and many of the frustrations they feel in relation to belonging to Islam in Britain, reflect debates within Islam itself quite apart from the discourse of converts. The religion-culture divide itself may represent this; as Jacobson argues of young British Muslims “this contemporary construction of religious boundaries (...) is consonant with the entire history of Islam (1997: 249)”. Issues such as gender equality, sexuality, the role of mosques and access to them, leadership and imams, Muslim organisations and relations with government, amongst others, are all historical and contemporary debates (see, Ahmed, 1992; Bulliet, 1994; Jawad, 1998; Wadud, 1999, 2008; Esposito, 2003; Ramadan, 2004; Kamrava, 2006; Duderija, 2007; Kundnani, 2007; Gilliat-Ray, 2010; Krämer, 2013; Hidayatullah, 2014; de Kadt, 2018; Khan, 2018; MWNUK). The Inclusive Mosque Initiative (IMI)¹⁷ and a new national council are good examples of institutional forms emerging out of such debates. Converts are entering into and contributing to these debates, and are doing so in a contextually embedded way, but they are certainly not specific to them.

This raises the need to link micro-, median- and macro-levels in our interpretive framework, features of the narratives discussed must be understood alongside the structural place of converts as Muslims in Britain.

Historical and structural factors of Islam and Muslims in Britain

The emergence of contemporary British converts to Islam into the position of in-betweenness must be understood in historical context. For British converts, their positioning as a cultural outsider and how this relates to how they position themselves as a religious insider reflects the historical context of how Islam and Muslims have taken root in Britain, or to be more precise, within the landmass of the physical ‘island’ territory of post-Imperial Britain. This is one way in which the situations of converts differ markedly from Quilliam’s time. An outline of this was presented in the introduction and now requires further direct, focussed consideration in relation to this discussion. At organizational and institutional levels (here construed as the median), in the UK just 2.1% of mosques have committees or trustees with people from more than one continent and a mere 0.3% have even one convert on them and at all involved in running the mosque (Naqshbandi, 2015). These figures represent the way Islam and Muslims have established themselves in Britain since the Second World War. That this has happened in large part along ethnic and sectarian lines (see Geaves, 1996; Nielsen, 2003; also Ansari, 2004)

¹⁷ See <http://inclusivemosqueinitiative.org/about/>

complicates the picture into which converts may try and find a place. A number of my participants mentioned the division of mosques by ethnicity and school of thought, and how “you’re immediately lost because the vast majority of mosques aren’t designed for converts”, as Matthew put it. This is also reflected in an interview with Batool al-Toma, who commented that you very rarely find converts on the governing bodies of mosques, as these tend to be along sectarian lines, and this affects converts’ ability to feel like they belong.

It is this broad picture that contemporary converts to Islam in Britain are emerging into and grappling with as they negotiate and construct boundaries and senses of belonging into which they can reconcile their faith and identity. What results is that very often they are adamant about the need to ‘nativise’ certain beliefs and practices in the ‘spirit’ of Islam but that are concordant in Britain. This is so alongside the fact that they make significant lifestyle changes in order to live more Islamic lives.

This contrasts with the situation in Germany (Özyürek, 2015), Scandinavia (Roald, 2004) and Italy (Salih, 2004). Roald, for example, notes the contrast between Britain and Scandinavia, where converts play a much more prominent role in inter-faith dialogues, attributing this to the difference in make-up between the Muslim communities in the respective countries and the structural patterns of how interaction with majority society is organised, especially in relation to the role of women (2004). Commenting on the situation in Italy, Salih (2004) points out that converts play a prominent role in the public sphere owing to structural arrangements between government and minority religion organisations. For Salih, as Özyürek, this serves to strengthen the exclusion of born Muslims as converts’ discourse of unity over diversity in fact serves to squeeze out born Muslims’ experiences as a cultural minority. In this regard, in Britain, by contrast, converts are not in a position of dominance or where they have the capacity to lead or set the terms of the debate at these levels.

It is relevant here to reflect on two further interviews I conducted. In addition to the narrative interviews on which this study is based, I also interviewed two prominent figures, both of whom are converts and run groups for converts. The first, Batool Al-Toma, runs The New Muslim Project, founded in 1993 with the specific purpose of supporting converts to Islam in Britain given a lack of such support and services being available. The New Muslim Project is a national organisation and offers numerous services, including retreats, open days, courses, a helpline and print materials, notably its quarterly magazine *Meeting Point*. The second, Cara¹⁸, runs a long-standing New Muslim Circle at a large mosque in a major city. Both of these reinforce much of the discussion so far. Both emphasise the need to delineate religion from culture, as far as is possible, and from both that of a convert’s own background as well as that

¹⁸ Anonymized to protect the confidentiality of group attendees.

of Muslim communities. Both likewise reflect on the structural character of Muslims in Britain, the emerging place of converts as 'part of the scene' as well as a pluralised, 'living' perspective of Islam.

Both explicitly reflect on the structural need for spaces specifically focussed for converts. Cara and Batool reflect on the growing numbers of converts in recent years and how earlier, when there were fewer, it was more necessary to assimilate into a Muslim community in order to live as a Muslim. This situation, however, has changed. The context now is very different with the growing number and confidence of converts and, Cara predicts, will continue to become so. For Cara, convert spaces are now becoming especially important to avoid the kinds of identity crises that result from the idea that a complete cultural transformation is a prerequisite of becoming Muslim. She does not see such shifts in negative terms, however – and this has important bearing on the discussion here and pluralism. She talks about the ideal of universality within Islam, that she would like to see Muslims together and not separated by ethnicity. But also, about how people do tend to congregate around similarities of language, culture and sense of humour, which she does not see in and of itself as being necessarily negative. Importantly, with reference to converts, this is not least because of differing needs of support. Cara comments, for example, on how the number of converts from Hindu and Sikh backgrounds is, although smaller than white Europeans of Christian backgrounds, also noticeably rising and that these converts need specific support in light of the more difficult time they tend to experience.

Batool likewise relates being challenged by born Muslims about why converts tend to group together. She responds by pointing to a parallel with why Muslim communities have done so for reasons both of associating with people felt to be more relatable and of responding to discrimination (also Cheeseman & Khanum, 2009). She talks about the need for convert spaces as being, at least for the time being, necessarily spaces away from mosques. In fact, *Meeting Point* itself can be seen as one of these spaces. It is thus that she explains *Meeting Point* focuses on educational, spiritual and practical issues and does not follow a particular school of thought. Moreover, she related how for these reasons (and to provide something more positive and uplifting) she has fought against "strong opposition" to keep it this way and to keep a focus on the UK and not on getting caught up in and distracted by the "outward drama" of 'Muslim news' abroad.

Through the Point of View section in which a number of readers respond to an initial question posed by a reader on aspects of Islam and being a Muslim in Britain, it becomes apparent how all sorts of issues are being negotiated and interpreted along these lines of religion and culture. Issues such as circumcision, lowering the gaze, cultural navigation, celebrating birthdays and Christmas, organ donation, changing of names, in-laws, and the niqab, to mention just a

handful of examples, are all debated. This focus is seen as especially important in a psycho-social environment in which converts, as Muslims more generally, can be immediately drawn into becoming political spokespeople for Muslims immediately after conversion, and in which one's immediate reaction to tragic news reported in the press ends up separating one's reaction to the symbolic meaning of the tragedy in the socio-political context from the tragedy itself. Batool reflects on this point and how this initial reaction rather than horror expressed at a killing, can become first, "Oh God, please don't let it be a Muslim".

For Cara, the fundamental importance of this focus within the group she runs is to ensure that converts are able to maintain their (cultural) identity and to support them in navigating this within Islam. This is in order to prevent them from becoming 'lost' between pressures to conform to a particular way of life that accords to the family or community they know and being put on a pedestal of 'purity'. That is, it is primarily a space in which converts can, with support, negotiate and develop their Islamic subjectivity. Similarly, Batool talks about the need to indigenise Islam in Britain in a way which does not exclude the cultural backgrounds of converts. She sees an important aspect of this as part of 'demystifying' Islam by drawing similarities with existing practices to aid understanding and avoid alienation. (This is, albeit being carried out very differently, a similar approach to many of the tactics adopted by Quilliam.) Here then we see explicit recognition of reculturation, and that treading a careful line in balancing the cultural and religious. This is quite a distinct position from that mentioned by Inge in relation to Salafi groups where they are encouraged to bond with one another against the rest of society (Inge, 2016: 140).

Drawing on a counselling background, Cara notes the specific vulnerability of converts, especially early on in their conversion journey when confusion and isolation can be overwhelming. The focus of the work of the group is to help each individual convert develop their relationship with God and to, therefore, mediate the road between what is pleasing for God and cultural practices that distract from, make no difference to, or help reinforce that. In this vein she stresses a focus on meaning when, for example, teaching the prayers in order to ensure that words and action are not merely mimicked 'robot-like' but are understood in their significance as a means of communicating with God; they should "carry weight on your heart" as she put it. This is not about denigrating cultural practices, however, but ensuring the centrality of faith in choices made. She uses the example of a convert who began turning up in a sari to make the point that following certain cultural practices, modes of dress and so on, are in fact fine but her emphasis is on ensuring that a convert is aware of the difference between this and the faith, that they are happy with it, and that it is not the result of pressure to conform on the basis that to not, for example, wear a sari, would be 'unIslamic'. As Batool related a similar point, "treat scholars like plumbers; always get three quotes". This then is not a wholesale rejection or circumvention of Islamic scholars and structures, but a recognition of

the differences within Islam. It is this itself that provides the space for contributing to it as opposed to seamlessly and silently fitting into it. In fact, the New Muslim Project's website has a Respecting Diversity section¹⁹ in which it encourages converts to learn more about different Islamic groups, schools of thought and organisations while not accepting all formulations at face value.

Batool emphasises these points with a focus on *urf* (custom of a particular society, here especially as an aspect of jurisprudence), addressing the religion-culture divide through an approach grounded in Islamic thought. She uses this to challenge particular ways of doing things and for the legitimacy of adapting traditional practices of Muslim communities. She uses the examples of weddings and funerals to describe how ceremonies can suit the *urf* of converts by ensuring necessary Islamic elements but maintaining aspects of their cultural and traditional practice in so far as there is no contradiction with Islamic norms. In fact, in an editorial of *Meeting Point* (2016) she makes a forthright claim for a living, pluralistic vision of Islam. Addressing this issue, she rails in characteristically combative style about how converts to Islam “often feel like square pegs being hammered into round holes” when such an approach is denied them in terms of what she construes as:

“the onslaught... [as] the dominant Muslim community strips away any evidence of personal individuality a particular cultural heritage might have passed on and which might well continue to enrich the colourful tapestry that is Islam and Muslim communities across the ages. This morphing of converts towards a kind of unification of cultural norms, ideas, habits and lifestyle... is destructive for those whose flair and imagination, aspiration and sense of exploration inspired within them the desire to take the first tentative steps along the path to spirituality and to a meaningful relationship with God.

[...]

The overriding message... is that there is little room for any generosity of spirit... There is a feeling of being gagged to the point of lunacy and Muslim communities, particularly the convert community, are paying the price as they ride on the coat tails of the dominant cultural expression of Islam that appears to reduce our humanity to its barest and most acutely calculated minimum.”

It is for these reasons that such an emphasis is placed on the need for non-prescriptive spaces in which converts can safely negotiate their subjectivity in a way which is focussed on supporting and promoting their personal flourishing, develop confidence and spirituality that

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http://www.newmuslimsproject.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=91&Itemid=200068

is a sustainable part of their lives, and can contribute positively to Islam as an organic, living religion²⁰ that, although universal in its other-worldly sense, is also thoroughly secular in recognition of its necessarily historical, contextual and this-worldly embeddedness. Here, the recognition of the secular is a recognition of plurality. It does not so much see “religion as a sphere separate from all other social realities” as do some prominent understandings of secularism (Özyürek, 2015: 132-133), as it does recognise the overlapping, intertwinement and interdependence of these social realities.

This position potentially does two things. It can firstly, along with the religion-culture divide, discursively drive apart ethnicity and religion in a manner which is sociologically unsustainable and may reproduce dominant majority-minority power dynamics. However, an effect of this is also to open up space in which ethnicity and religion can quite conscientiously be brought back together again and where all cultural and traditional practices, including the previously unmarked of the white majority, become visible and negotiable. It can form a process of conscious and reflective reculturation and contribution. This of course is the challenge for both converts and born Muslim communities, and this is perhaps the site on which Muslim identities and understandings of Islam as ongoing, living dialogue takes place in its context in Britain.

What we can begin to see then is how at this level converts are engaged in a form of ‘tactical religion’ which “does not necessarily shun the spaces and controlled enchantments of the strategic, but it tries to enter into them, to appropriate aspects of them, to turn them to new uses and to gain some control over them” (Woodhead, 2013: 16). Here Woodhead draws on de Certeau’s (1988) distinction between ‘strategy’, which would here be the authority from mosque leadership, Islamic scholars and Muslim communities, and ‘tactics’, those practices adopted by people who are skeptical of these forms of leadership and authority. Here then, the institutional forms of Islam can be seen, at this median-level, to represent strategic religion, even if at the national level they do not. Converts and convert ‘circles’ represent an instance of tactical religion. This itself recalls the discussion of ‘elastic orthodoxy’ in the previous chapter but reinserts its consideration back into the structural factors that seek to regulate and organize subjectivities. Rather than an either/or position, we can find that these aspects explored here emphasise different dimensions of identity in differing relations to a sociologically plural identity category ‘Muslim’. A cultural dimension may distinguish converts, and perhaps even distinguish some converts from others. Nevertheless, a religious dimension, itself with an ethical dimension, may be broader. This also can align converts with young Muslims who are equally turning directly to the Qur’an and hadith, as well as to alternative scholars.

²⁰ While striking a more conciliatory tone and emphasizing the generosity of the mosque and Muslim community in supporting the group under their umbrella, Cara made similar points.

Characteristics of categorisation

On the one hand, then, we can trace a broader category of being 'Muslim' which fits in well with existing definitions of Islamophobia. This challenges cultural and anti-Muslim prejudice from non-Muslims. Here the mode of being (meaning *religiosity*) and mode of oppression are more sociologically separated. There is a clearer link here to Werbner's reification and objectification discussed in chapter 2, where Islamophobia and its discursive reifying of 'Muslims' is countered through having 'each other's backs' as Muslims. On the other hand, there is a category more firmly affixed to the religious where the mode of being and mode of oppression, or at least the experience and interpretation of that oppression, are closer together. Rather than seeing this as opposed to the former, a more sociologically religious aspect allows us to see these as related and in inevitable, ongoing negotiation.

For these reasons, especially with reference to the 'community of suffering' and the structural differences between Islam in Britain and in Germany, Scandinavia and Italy, we have been able to problematize how 'safe' it is to call converts Islamophobic and racist. The effect of this statement is to separate them out in a way in which they do not necessarily do, see or feel themselves. It also fails to account for the specificity of this discourse to converts but non-specificity of it to particular ethnic groups of converts and by so doing obscures the discrimination they face from both sides. It maintains an 'us' and 'them' binary against a more pluralistic view of Islam, the people who constitute or are at certain times drawn into that category, and the character of the debates going on within the 'shared understanding'. We can add to Modood's 'not racial terms only' by saying, 'not racial or ethnic terms only'. This should not be read, however, as an apology for converts' Islamophobic discourse. It is rather to show how this emerges from a particular frame and obscures important dynamics and aspects of subjectivity. The point here is to show how this emerges out of more complex dynamics than may be supposed by a binary conception. It reflects that, as the quote that opened the section conveyed: how we see Islamophobia, depends on how we see Islam.

What was important about the dynamics of belonging sketched out in the previous chapter, and which the discussion so far has attempted to address, was not just that converts must stake out a way of being Muslim and belonging in Britain, but also that they must equally stake out a way of being British and belonging in Islam. There are, however, significant structural factors and conditions that are salient in relation to this second aspect. It is now time to relate the discussion so far more directly to more macro-level epistemological considerations.

Difference, religion and the social imaginary

What has emerged in the discussions so far is that it is necessary to hold *religiosity* as a mode of being central when thinking about difference. As Taylor argued, the discussions here suggest that approaches to understanding contemporary religiosity, or spirituality, that oppose religiosity (or spirituality) on the one hand, with religion on the other can “foreshorten the reality” being studied (Taylor, 2007: 509). The problematic is not the opposition but the interdependent and mutually constitutive relation. Simmel has helped us see that rather than opposition, although it can sometimes appear as such, what we have instead is an inevitable dialectic between the personal and the social and the divine. Converts, with a deep sense of the divine, must figure out this relationship in a particular social space. This necessarily has consequences for how they do and can relate to themselves, to the divine and to society both in narrower terms, that is, limited to more immediate relationships of family, friends and Muslims they have frequent contact with, as well as wider terms. By wider terms, I mean wider in the ‘imaginary’ sense, not necessarily the geographical. That is, the abstract of the wider ‘imaginary’ may actually manifest in very concrete local ways.

If, however, it is the case that while “ethnic identities are welcomed in the public space, there is much more unease about religion” and in particular Muslim religious identities (Meer, 2010: 200; also Cheeseman and Khanum, 2009), and if, furthermore, for converts their *religiosity* may also be ‘frowned upon’ from within Muslim communities, there is a need to address the issue of *religiosity* as part of a wider context and discussion. This might then contribute to an identified need for “the development of an inclusive dialogue on faith [which] would promote better relations between Muslims and the rest of society” (Cheeseman & Khanum, 2009: 59). This is perhaps necessary not least in the context of Britain as religiously plural and where, “a great deal of evidence suggests that pluralism increases religiosity” (Lockett & Jelen, 2017: 5).

In addition, contributions along these lines are given extra importance when the fact that religious identity is often subordinated or treated with circumspection can also be seen in how more sympathetic commentators also reproduce a negativized position towards it. For example, Parekh (2008), although a prominent exponent of multiculturalism in Britain, and while appreciating the “range and depth” of religious identity, develops a discussion focussing on the dangers of spiritual literalism and fundamentalism, evaluating religion negatively against reason in a chapter indicatively titled *The Pathology of Religious Identity* (2008: 130-151). Roy, in his discussion of converts as epitomising the deculturation of Islam, is also primarily concerned with fundamentalism and how the process of deculturation makes possible a type of scriptural literalism that gives rise to extremist interpretations and actions. When acts of terrorism justified by their perpetrators at least in part along religious lines dominate much

political and media attention, these concerns and a focus on applying scholarship to interpret them are understandable and necessary. Such associations and emphases, however, do little to challenge dominant perceptions and fears of the threat Islam and Muslims supposedly pose to the West, or to its and their supposed alienness. Nor do they do much to challenge the view that religion more broadly, and at least in the present context Islam more narrowly, is intrinsically violent and problematic in a way which secularism is not (Casanova, 2008; Cavanaugh, 2009). There is then another important conversation about religious identity and Islam that needs to gain more traction in light of this background context, especially where “the question of conversion is perhaps most acute with respect to Islam” (Ahmad A, 2017: 7).

Therefore, the negative that needs turning into a positive is *religiosity*. It is on these grounds that converts can be strange and resultantly caught in what Acheraïou has called “the space of the impossible” (2011: 79), a site of alienation in which their subjectivity as British and Muslim can face a double-denial from both non-Muslims and Muslims. They thus fall outside both a religious imaginary on grounds of it being tied to particular ethnic identities and a secular imaginary on grounds of being religious. The task becomes, then, to think about how a space of the possible might be thought. Two aspects are imperative for this task. One has formed the discussion here so far. The second is the link between the religious and the secular as part of the ‘social imaginary’.

A possible imaginary

Charles Taylor discusses what he calls ‘social imaginary’ as “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows. The expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations (...) it is shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society... [and it] is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy” (2004: 23). What is at stake here is precisely these ‘deeper normative notions’. In *A Secular Age* (2007), Taylor sets out how the social imaginary is secular, that is, concerned with this-worldly matters, and that this is true of both non-religious as well as religious people. Yet, as we have seen, this alone is not necessarily the issue. The issue comes when a strong view of secular-religious separation denies religious identities presence, space and the ability to contribute in the public realm, reducing and containing their subjectivity.

Craig Calhoun has argued that, “Secularism is often treated as a sort of absence... We need to see secularism as a presence, as something...” (2010: 35). The point is that secular space, secular politics, secular imaginaries, secular identities are not neutral, they do not empty out

content and provide an equalising plane in which people then act. It is for this reason that secularism is not the same something everywhere we may find it. Secularism is something just as religion is something, as might more readily be understood even by those who oppose it, in fact this might be precisely what they oppose. Once we recognise that we have two somethings, there is scope for the somethings to have dialogue. This can be the basis of a view of pluralism. But this is no binary between secular and religious – they are not discrete somethings even if it is the secular social imaginary that prompts such attention to how the religious manifests (Mehta, 2008). The two are interminably interlinked and interdependent (Knott, 2016). For religious people are also secular, their lives are largely structured by and take place in a secular social imaginary, in “the immanent frame”; the immanent frame being “the sensed context in which we develop our beliefs” (Taylor, 2007: 549). What is apparent in how the religious and secular are represented in my participants’ narratives is that the secular is a something within the transcendent just as the transcendent is a something in the secular. This itself can be understood as underpinning Modood’s arguments for a ‘moderate secularism’ (2009a, 2010, 2014, 2015) as a constructive response and alternative to ‘radical secularism’. As has already been noted, Islam is often seen to posit a rather more intractable problem when it comes to the relationship between the religious and the secular. From the view along the lines of moderate secularism, however, and with an appreciation of the historical picture between the two concepts sketched in chapter 4, we can challenge this position.

While *religiosity* itself may be unbounded by empirical worldliness, and why for some believers they “are always in the condition of God” (Bowker, 2015: 152), it is manifested in worldly activity and in secular space. This, in turn, activates engagement with worldly social forms such as the Sharia as far as that is understood in an institutionalised sense. Here the secular takes on a double characterization. It is firstly the world *sub specie temporis* in a wider sense, and therefore the space and time which we inevitably inhabit. Here *religiosity* is an unbounded way of being in the secular. In a narrower sense, however, the secular is also manifested in the social forms of *religion* in the world. Here, those forms can be challenged and changed. This distinction helps dissipate an oppositional and necessarily antagonistic relationship between the secular and religious.

Recognising religiosity

In the context of this discussion, the importance of the time spent making a case for the involuntariness of religious identity with regard to how this relates to Islamophobia becomes again apparent. This is so in relation to recognition, a central pillar, “essential” (Modood, 2007: 56) to multiculturalism. Mirroring the discussion of Islamophobia above, what is to be recognised is not Islam as a definable set of ideas or religious doctrine, but the people for

whom Islam is central to their being. As has been stressed, as well as what is shared, precise scriptural interpretations, beliefs and practices vary. But the strength, depth and importance of religious identity is consistent. What we are recognising is people rather than a system of belief (Modood, 2007; Galeotti, 2004; Jones, 2006). In this way “the question of the relationship between religion and the world will likely be negotiated through a complex set of lived experiences” (Mehta, 2008: 78). This is the positive side for recognition, recognition of the reality, value, and meaning for those who hold such an identity. In short, it is recognising their ‘being-value’ (Gadamer, 2013 [1960]: 246). The negative side is that its refusal or denial is a source of injustice and cause of harm. This harm can manifest in a number of ways: it can produce social barriers and exclusions that others more freely enjoy, it can also cause psycho-social harm where one is made strange. Recognition of this sort does not demand endorsement. Requiring a non-believer to endorse Islam or a Muslim to endorse atheism is neither helpful nor necessary. Recognition is not accorded on the basis of the merit of the content of Islam or atheism but on recognition of an individual or groups rights as an equal member of the citizenry who, as such, should not face exclusions to their enjoyment of those rights.

It can be seen from the discussions so far how converts, as a ‘minority within a minority’ (Brice, 2010), can find themselves “in a social position from which it is impossible to assert their characteristics as normal outside their own group” (Galeotti, 2004: 90). This can be both in relation to Muslim communities at one level and society more widely at another. Converts are misrecognised, where that registers an asymmetrical relation in the capacity to recognise, at two levels. As a ‘minority within a minority’ converts start from a position where their ability to assert and claim positive difference in a socially effective way is severely constrained. It is again here that in relation to established Muslim communities, converts’ claims can be seen as assertions of their difference and particularity, as claims to belong and participate under a ‘shared fund’ rather than as claims to belong at the exclusion of others. This requires, however, an unsettling of the prevailing societal norms in relation to religious identity.

It is not necessary, nor perhaps possible, especially when talking about ontological difference, and nor perhaps even desirable, to reach consensus on everything. In fact, it has been argued that for accommodating unity in diversity both consensus and contestation are important. What is more important is an insistence on “a plurality of ‘us’ and ‘Others’” (Ezzati and Erdal, 2017: 379; also Amin, 2012). Diana Eck has identified four dimensions of pluralism: not merely diversity in a descriptive sense, but “energetic engagement” underpinned by an “active seeking of understanding”, the “encounter of commitments”, and also that pluralism is based on dialogue (Eck, 2006). We can see here the relevance of a multicultural dialogue founded on a premise of “the solution [being] *genuinely* open” and constructive of relations (Modood, 2017a: 86, emphasis added); moreover, the importance of putting our horizons and legitimate

prejudices at risk as part of this dialogical process. This call itself reflects the challenge mentioned above for converts as well as born Muslim communities. This, however, extends this challenge to the macro level, reflected in Rosie's stance on multiculturalism at the opening of this chapter.

The stress on Islam's compatibility with Britain itself attests to this. Islam can, has done, and should be inclusive: "For centuries, Islam has given people of vastly disparate cultures and backgrounds a common Islamic identity while allowing them to retain their own national flavours and keep the bonds of kinship intact. It has never required its adherents to contract amnesia nor demand [a] sort of 'unilateral cultural disarmament'" an editorial in *Meeting Point* (Feb 2002; see also Editorials in 2007, 2008) reminds its readers. This argument is also true for Britain. 'British', just like 'Muslim' can act as a superordinate, and umbrella term under which are differences based on a 'shared common fund'. Here there is a link between a 'social imaginary' and a 'narrative imaginary' (Meretoja, 2017: 24; Brockmeier, 2009) which goes some way to its construction.

We can read in my participants' narratives claims of belonging based in understandings of (moderate) secular pluralism and that these claims to belong are firmly grounded in a vision of such pluralism. By contrast, the *umma*, for example, had no real presence as a secular concern, as can be seen in Vidya's complaints about people. While it may be recognized as an aspect of the divine other-worldly aspect of Islam's universalism and may serve as an ethic through which to approach others, it has little purchase as a this-worldly reality. It in fact forms one of the great frustrations that Muslims are, inevitably, not able to live in this world according to some of the larger religious ideals. Moreover, most would not want to see secular pluralism undermined, even if theologically all souls are Muslim, but rather seek full recognition and participation as part of it. The emphasis on reculturating Islam in Britain itself is an example of a very secular outlook that questions suggestions that the *umma* or *religiosity* itself somehow threaten other forms of belonging or social relations.

The challenge highlighted by convert narratives relates to how this conversation is to be framed. The challenge converts present in this regard is not a direct one, however, and is better conceived as a challenge to broaden, to open up the way in which these issues are thought. Difference is liberative as far as it offers conceptual tools that see difference as positive rather than as an obstacle to be overcome. The argument for the religious in this conversation follows from recognising that "no one can feel at ease and retain self-esteem and self-respect if he or she is socially accepted despite being [Muslim, religious], since such acceptance would amount to a denial of significant components or elements of one's (personal) identity" (Galeotti, 2004: 98). British converts to Islam do not represent a break or a new

phase of the history and its relevance to that approach, but rather a newer and more recent aspect within that history as it inevitably and inextricably muscles into the present.

Chapter summary

This chapter has had as its focus bringing the implications of the discussions of identity and belonging in the previous two chapters into conversation more directly with multiculturalism; its fundamental theoretical concerns of difference and recognition, its concern with Islamophobia, and how these relate to the secular. As such, I am not offering a replacement for multiculturalism, as interculturalism attempts, nor an epistemological break in favour of the micro, as everyday multiculturalism attempts, but rather a turn, and addition, as part of a broader framework of multiculturalism. The purpose of this 'turn' is to open up epistemological and narrative space for religious subjectivities.

In doing this, it has emphasised a multi-level approach. It started by discussing how converts' religious identities can be understood in relation to a sociological foundation for inclusion in debates around Islamophobia. It then turned to the issue of reculturation and of converts themselves being Islamophobic. In line with the analytical and multi-level lens of this thesis as a whole, it explored the ambiguity behind this. It argued that while converts certainly do reproduce aspects of Islamophobic discourse, it would be misplaced to 'safely' label them Islamophobic. This is partly so because of the ambiguity as it has been explored here, and partly so as a result of assumptions that may lie behind such a 'safe' position.

I have argued for the need to take seriously a sociological approach to the religious that does not lose *religiosity* as part of the analysis. This necessarily unsettles both binaries, of, for example, 'us' and 'them' or 'religious' and 'secular', as well as fusions, of, for example, 'ethnic' and 'religious'. The hope of this is that it may contribute to opening up space for inclusions. The discussion of pluralism has also highlighted challenges. These are not least because of the ways in which Islamophobia and social exclusions are both challenged and used. Overall, as we have seen, where claims for belonging are based on pluralism there is scope for inclusion, but this is not without challenges. These challenges centre around the conception of difference and how religious subjects are to be included more fully in the 'social imaginary'. There are challenges here too for Muslims and Muslim communities in how they relate to and include converts as agentive under the 'shared fund' of Islam. These challenges equally extend to converts under this 'shared fund'. These are also dialogic challenges that must be recognizant of their layered position in society in the intersections of social stratification. Part of this will undoubtedly involve an open questioning of how the 'religious' is understood, being cautious of operationalising it as a unitary term. The reproduction of Islamophobic discourse is a

challenge, here as more generally. The argument is that the very pluralism converts emphasise as they stake their own case for belonging, can itself form part of how this is done. Significantly, if this fails to address religious epistemologies, it is unlikely to succeed.

Far from the perception of converts as “see[ing] Islam in a very inorganic way, as a reified state of being, a static set of scriptures and teachings, in other words NOT as a living organic, culturally contextualized set of practices, identities and beliefs that inevitably change with place and time” (Mandel, 2015: 363), it is precisely because converts emphasise the living, the contextual, the place and time, that these challenges and their particular character exist. And it is precisely on these terms that these challenges can be undertaken. It is the dialectic between *religion* and *religiosity* which provokes these debates, and which converts necessarily and qua converts shine a light on.

Chapter 10: Conclusion

This thesis has presented several interrelated and mutually constitutive arguments. Fundamental to these is an alternative orientation towards the understanding of religious identity. This is needed, it is argued, to address conceptual inadequacies in the literatures of multiculturalism and conversion to Islam and the effects, even where unintended, that result. Moreover, it is also necessary in relation to popular perceptions of the religious and of Islam and Muslims, and converts in particular. The arguments offer a critical contribution in relation to multiculturalism in Britain that draws on the internal logic of multiculturalism to offer arguments which “accept *what is important to people...* [and to] *be even-handed between the different identity formations*” (Modood, 1997/2015: 170, emphasis in original) in relation to religious identity.

To make this first step I argued for a theoretical shift that brought religious identity to the centre of analysis in a way that did not a priori view it as oppositional, antagonistic or discrete. To make this move I draw on Simmel’s notions of *religiosity* and *religion*. A significant aspect of this was a conversation between sociology and theological principles as mutually enriching based on a methodologically agnostic approach. The methodological approach outlined was in turn supported by an understanding of identity that was theoretically informed by a narrative understanding of identity, and, accordingly, narrative interviews and narrative analyses. Empirically, in relation to identity, this involved tracing lines and dynamics of continuity and change in my participants’ narratives. This was the task of chapter 6, where the argument was that rather than focussing on or emphasising continuity or change, or even continuity *and* change, it is necessary to look at continuity *with* change. It is the interaction and dynamics between them that is fundamentally important to understanding processes of meaning and self-making. In that chapter we saw how aspects of change and continuity were managed through processes of meaning-making in relation to a past-oriented sense of self, which established *being* in relation to a recontextualised continuity and *religiosity*, and a future-oriented sense of self, which concerned *becoming* in relation to this *being* and established a view of congruity. I argued the concept of congruity shifts the analytical lens and includes and involves the twin aspects of continuity and change, the dynamics between them and how these dynamics can produce an evolving, processual sense of wholeness. This is also found in the theological concept of *fitrah*, which registers the betweenness of the personal and divine and a view of this process of unification.

The other significant problematic that this thesis dealt with was that of the religion-culture divide prominent in converts’ discourse. While implicit in chapter 6, this was drawn out more fully through the discussions in chapters 7, 8 and 9, which focussed on aspects of belonging

and developed a discussion from this of a perspective on Islamophobia. Here a shift was made away from seeing converts as positioned in-between, to exploring how they are between. That is to say that the analytical approach developed emphasised how they are *of* society rather than merely *in* society. Through the analytical lens of the *stranger*, for which I again drew on Simmel, and particularly the ideas of nearness and distance, we saw how British converts to Islam position themselves as both of Britain and Islam, and, importantly as critical friends, strange and familiar, of both. As far as belonging is understood along racial and ethnic lines to the exclusion of religious, its view remains narrow and trapped within racial binaries that serve to a priori exclude converts. An important general trend to come out of this discussion, notwithstanding greater nuance and complexity, was converts' positioning as religiously inside Islam but culturally outside Muslim communities whilst culturally inside but religiously outside society more widely. It is on these dynamics that their positioning as *stranger* facilitates a "positive and specific kind of participation" (Simmel, 1950: 404).

In relation to multiculturalism and Islamophobia this produced several implications. Religion and ethnicity operate and interact in ways both overlapping but also as distinct, and it is this distinction that has been the focus of analytical interrogation here as it is this that has been hitherto under-discussed. We have also, however, not just drawn them apart for analytical purposes, but also put them back together again to say something about their form of interaction and overlap. Such attempts are vital to develop a more nuanced and complex picture of how people live their lives and their selves *of* society. The first, and particular theoretical contribution to multiculturalism, was to argue that *religiosity* is a necessary site on which to think about *difference*. Following this, it is *religiosity* as the basis of difference that requires recognition if the promise of multiculturalism's positions with regard to social equality and social justice are to be realized with respect to religious subjects. Being conceived on purely sociological modes of reasoning, such subjectivities have so far been under-represented and under-theorized in multiculturalism and, as we saw, would fall outside the scope of its arguments for who is a Muslim and why. It was argued that a sociology with a 'theological ear' and *religiosity* as the site of difference addresses this short-coming.

This raised the need to adopt a multi-level analysis with an appreciation of the structural and historical position of Muslims, Islam and converts in British society. Viewed from this perspective, converts' reproducing aspects of Islamophobic discourses can be seen to represent the meeting point of dominant discourses, recognition of a 'community of suffering' (as a possible mode of objectification), and discrimination they face from born Muslims, along with their sense of *religiosity*, theological principles of unity and plurality, and their attempts to carve open a space as *strangers* (relatedly, see Ahmad A, 2017). To disconnect and over-simplify one of these, or at least not to reconnect it, risks its own forms of essentialism and marginalizing converts through questioning the genuineness of their conversion and the struggles they

experience as religious subjects. The value of the complexity here is its ability to argue for a greater level of openness and inclusion.

There were also implications for thinking about the relationship between the secular and the religious, where these are premised on exclusivity or opposition, particularly when it comes to Islam, but need not be so. The view of pluralism that emerges here and that sees the religious and secular as distinct yet intertwined is one attached to, not separate from, *religiosity*, which activates the kind of person and society envisioned and striven for; “the question of how to live is intimately linked to the question of who we are” (Meretoja, 2017: 15). Here, multiculturalism’s moderate secularism is better able to keep a view of such pluralism. The point of the type of multicultural dialogue suggested here is not to necessarily lead to more agreement, but to be able to disagree better, not to dissolve difference as a problem, but to be able to live better with difference. Recognising this as the basis for dialogue is important in order not to create a priori exclusions.

This also raises challenges across these levels and ‘shared funds’. For converts, a significant challenge stems from the discursive division between religions and culture, and how this may reproduce Islamophobic discourse. For born Muslims, the implication is a challenge to include converts as part of the ‘shared fund’ of Islam and recognize them as belonging to Islam based on their *religiosity*. For society more broadly, the challenge is about including space for and the stories of religious, and Muslim, subjectivities.

Ultimately, this has been about the stories we tell to as well as of ourselves as individuals, as groups and as societies. The importance of these stories is that at the personal level they are significant sites of meaning-making and of self-making for how we feel about ourselves as individuals and how we feel about ourselves as part of the society in which we live. The stories discussed throughout this thesis are in so many important ways and with various dynamics and patterns, attempts to “weave the [Islamic religious] life into the fabric of the social” (Plummer, 1995: 87), not least because “struggles over narrative agency are struggles over the possible” (Meretoja, 2017: 299). We can see the frequent invocation of ‘coming out’ as registering the lack of space, the lack of a community to hear these stories, the meaning they have for those who tell them, and the struggles that they are going through to have their stories ‘out’, accepted, heard, and which can develop into new communal forms of being and belonging. It registers the spaces that are closed to such identities and routes to belonging and the struggle to find a language and register through which to begin to open them up to what will undoubtedly, in time, take on a different analogous expression.

Gauri Viswanathan argued that conversion can “unsettle the boundaries which selfhood, citizenship, nationhood, and community are defined, exposing these permeable borders”

(Viswanathan, 1998: 16). Her study was concerned with showing how conversion to mainstream religion does this. Here we have seen how conversion to a minority religion also does this, and some of the complex dynamics of what becomes a transgressive unsettling based on betweenness that is premised on belonging, rather than in-betweenness.

There are several future areas of study suggested by the discussions and arguments made here, and which would contribute to these stories. There is more to be done on the different experiences of converts from different ethnic backgrounds. We have seen some of the important similarities and differences, but this remains under-researched and these points themselves suggest that there is more we can learn here. There would also be a clear benefit from a comparative study across national borders, not least because of the different structural arrangements, positions and historical contexts that have been alluded to in places here. Again, a more focussed study from this angle has the potential to be illuminating on aspects of belonging not only of converts but of Islam and Muslims more broadly, and feed into debates on Islam in/of Europe. There is also the issue of *religiosity*. How do converts to other religions contrast? What about disaffiliation or deconversion? More could also be done comparatively on this point between converts and those born into the faith, including those reverting from within. There are discursive similarities in the religion-culture divide but from significantly different social positions. A further area suggested by but outside the scope of this project is that of place and space, be those different geographical locations in which people live and their demographic differences, or spaces within and without mosques. We have also seen how an approach based on Simmel's thinking can be fruitful, yet he remains marginal, almost entirely absent, in these discussions and debates. There is, I hope I have established, a clear place for rich and enlightening work that draws on his thought, not least the more obvious Simmelian sociological task of investigating the forms, interactional and institutional, prompted by the questions above. A final area for further thought is the mode of dialogue and conversation between sociology and theological principles brought out, attending to the epistemological and ontological considerations.

Appendix I

Table 1: Participant details²¹

Name	Age	Occupation	Marital ²² status	Social class ²³	Gender	Education	Ethnic background	Religious background	Time since conversion ²⁴
Aakash	31	Self-employed – IT	Religious marriage	Middle now but from upper	M	BSc Management	Indian	Hindu	3 years
Adele	25	English teacher (secondary); Head of English	Divorced/single	Working (based on Kate Middleton being middle)	F	BA Theology, Arts & Education	White Australian	Catholic	10 months
Amal	40	Unemployed (gave up previous job recently - soon to take up position as Catering Manager)	Married	Used to be middle/upper; now doesn't know - never thinks about it	F	Trained obstetrician	Father was from KSA; mother from Somalia; was brought up in Italy	Muslim/ Catholic	8-9 years
Amber	33	Administrator	Married	Working class	F	BSc Nursing Studies; doing accountancy exams	Black African	None	3-4 years
Angela	37	Mother	Married	Working class	F	BA Tourism Management Development	Caucasian Australian/British	Non-religious but spiritual or agnostic rather than atheist	About 5 years
Gayle	69	Retired	Single	Upper-working class/lower-middle class	F	BA Humanities	White British	Christian	18 years
Hannah	52	Foster Carer	Religious marriage	Working/middle class	F	O levels	Baptised but no religious education	Nominally Christian	4 years
Jerry	37	PhD student	Married	Middle class	M	MA, doing PhD	1/2 English, 1/4 Norwegian, 1/8 Irish, 1/8 Welsh	C of E nominally	18 months

²¹ All names have been changed in a way congruous with the name the participants use. Participants are presented in alphabetical order arranged by given pseudonym. All other details are at time of interview.

²² Where 'religious marriage' is given, this indicates that the participant has had a religious marriage but *not* a marriage registered in UK law. In one case this is rendered as 'spiritual marriage' to reflect the participant's phrasing, but here refers to the same. Where 'married' is given, this indicates that the participant is both registered as married by UK law and has a religious marriage in line with Islamic principles and procedures. This status also reflects their current marital status – a number of single participants are also divorced, some from a marriage before they came to Islam, some a divorce from an Islamic marriage and some both.

²³ This, along with gender, ethnic background and religious background are based on participants' self-identification rather than a standardised measurement or categorisation tool defined by the researcher, and the wording at times reflects this.

²⁴ The time given here indicates when the participant took their *shahada*.

Julia	32	Temp	Married	Working class	F	Diploma in Health and Social Care	Biological father from St Lucia, father who brought her up from Ghana, Mum white English Indian	Christian	6 years
Rizwan	42	Tour guide – self-employed	Single	Middle but from working	M	MSc Health Promotion	Indian	Hindu	24 years
Kamal	54	Has student boarders	Religious marriage	Working class	F	BSc Geology	Very English	Raised Jehovah's Witness Practised mainstream Christianity as an adult	7 ½ years
Katarzyna	29	Works in PR	Spiritual marriage	Middle class	F	MA Advertising and PR	White Polish	Atheist (spiritual)	2 years
Kate	18	Student (awaiting results to start uni in Sept)	Single	Lower-middle (but unsure)	F	College	African Black British	Catholic	1 year 4 months
Lewis	22	Works at ONS	Single	Prefer not to say	M	MSc Environmental Policy and Management	White British	Atheist	11 months
Matthew	29	Youth Support worker	Married	Working class background - between working and middle now	M	BTEC IT; vocational training	White British	Atheist	10 years
Rachel	29	Social worker	Married	Working class background - between working and middle	F	MA social work	White British	Atheist	3 years
Richard	39	Martial arts teacher/hair dresser	Single (has long-term partner)	Working/Middle class	M	A levels	Irish Catholic	Catholic	4 years
Rosie	44	Executive Administrator; Japanese Lecturer at a university	Divorced	Middle class	F	MA Japanese linguistics, MA Islam in Britain	White Canadian/British/Welsh	Non-practising, nominally Christian	19 years
Sanjay	46	IT	Married	Average	M	BSc Engineering with Business Management; CIMA Accountancy qualification	Indian	Hindu	12 years
Saoirse	28	Unemployed	Single	None	F	NVQ Level 2 Catering and Hospitality	Irish/English	Roman Catholic (practising)	11 ½ years
Simran	26	UG student	Single	Working class	F	3rd year of BA Global Politics & International Relations	Indian	Sikh	
Stephen	56	Currently unemployed	Married	Middle class	M	MSc Physiotherapy	White British	Christian	5 years 2 months
Susanne	42	Life and corporate coach	Married	Middle class	F	MA Islamic Studies	White European	Atheist	17 years
Vidya	25	Lawyer	Single	Working class	F	Law degree	Indian	Hindu	7 years
Zaara	44	Housewife	Married	Working class	F	None	Indian	Hindu/Sikh	24 years

Appendix II

Information sheet and consent form

INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

Reconsidering Multicultural Identities and Belongings: British Converts to Islam and Multiculturalism

I would like to invite you to participate in this research project. Before you choose whether or not you would like to take part, please take the time to read the following information about the project. Please feel free to ask me any questions you may have or if you would like further information.

Project aims

The focus of my research is to contribute a different perspective on what is broadly referred to as multiculturalism. In relation to this I am particularly interested in religion, and in this case, reverts' experiences of relations, identities and belonging in society.

Who is conducting this research?

I am a PhD student at the University of Bristol and this research forms part of my PhD. My supervisors are Professor Tariq Modood and Dr Therese O'Toole. My PhD is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

What does taking part in this study mean?

Participation in this research is voluntary. It involves one face to face interview, which is likely to last between one and two hours. With your permission I would like to record this interview. For some, who are happy to do so, it may also involve keeping a diary of social interactions for two weeks, either electronically or a paper diary. You are free to take part in an interview and not take part in the diary aspect of the research if you do not want to.

If you decide to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form (see over) and I will explain the interview procedure with you and arrange a convenient time and place for the interview.

You can stop the interview or diary at any time and are free to withdraw consent. Your real name and the names of anyone else you use will be changed for anonymity.

What are the possible benefits and risks of taking part?

The information I get from this study will help further understand important aspects of identities and belonging in a multicultural society, especially with regard to Islam. This will contribute to enhancing understanding of Muslims' experience in Britain and tackling Islamophobia. I am happy to send you a report of the research when it is complete if you wish. There are no foreseeable risks in taking part.

What will happen to my interview?

This research has been granted ethical approval by the University of Bristol's Research Ethics Committee (School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies). Recordings and their transcriptions will be encrypted and stored securely and in accordance with the Data Protection Act.

The information you provide will be used for research purposes and used in accordance with current data protection legislation, the University's ethics guidelines, and the University's notification lodged at the Information Commissioner's Office. Your personal data will be treated with the strictest confidence and will not be disclosed to any unauthorised third parties. The results of the research will only be published in anonymised form, and anonymised data (transcripts) may be uploaded to the UK Data Service in accordance with ESRC requirements and subject to your permission. Recordings will be deleted following the project's

completion. Any real names and any other contact information will not be uploaded or otherwise shared and will be known only to the researcher, and will be destroyed following completion of the project.

Who can I contact for further information?

For further information about the research or your data, please contact:

Thomas Sealy: c/o 1 Priory Road, University of Bristol, Bristol, BS8 1TX;

or thomas.sealy@bristol.ac.uk.

If you have any concerns or questions about the research you would like to discuss with someone else at the university, you can contact: Tariq Modood, T.Modood@bristol.ac.uk.

Thank you for reading this information sheet and for considering taking part in this research.

If you are happy to participate in this research, please complete the form below.

CONSENT

I have been fully informed about the aims and purposes of this project and any questions I have have been answered to my satisfaction.

I consent to participate in this research project and by so doing I understand that:

- there is no compulsion for me to participate in this research project
- the interview will be audio recorded
- if I choose to participate, I may withdraw personal data at any stage up until any publication (after which data may be withdrawn for any future publication). If I withdraw, my personal data will be destroyed.
- any information which I give will be used solely for the purposes of this research project, which may include academic publications or presentations
- all information I give will be treated as confidential
- the researcher will make every effort to preserve my anonymity

.....

(signature of participant)

.....

(signature of researcher)

.....

(printed name of participant)

.....

(printed name of researcher)

.....

(date)

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